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THE BLIND FOR SACRIFICE

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The Blind for Sacrifice

by

John Owen

And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil?

Malachi i. 8.

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TO

MY BROTHER

CHARLES

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CHAPTER I

THE clouds were up over Drowning Marsh and the grey sea drove under the red cliff. A sea bird, its beak and passive, hanging feet providing the only colour to the grey sea, screamed as it made indolently to perch upon a tall wave. It was a secretly troubled sea, without breakers; breakers are rarely seen on this coast. What are seen are gigantically swelling tides, the force of which is only realised when the sea strikes the shelf of the beach or the cliff foot.

Inland was wind-swept pasture marked, a hundred yards from the cliff-face, by a wire fence. In the hollow, still further from the sea, was a small, red-brick, double-fronted house with outbuildings, including a dairy. A hundred yards from the house but within its grounds was a small red cottage.

The village, red but half hid to-day in summer trees, looked far, far away.

II

When Ezra Dearbourn, the blind ex-Service man, came to Westerby, his uncle, at Drowning Marsh, there was some natural comment.

"Blind," said the little postman, with the excited eyes of a puppy and the torn beard of a goat —who was the only person to see the stranger arrive. "That young man look as if he been through it. He dew! Won'ful how the war show in a face. And him not more'n in his twenty-five!"

For of course he wore blinded in the war?

But Westerby never replied to enquiries. They said that was why he'd never married—didn't want to be asked if he'd take this woman, for then he'd have to answer a perfectly civil question, yes or no.

But Westerby was a poor thing and even his silence lacked the technique of a master of evasion. Not that anybody knew this till he'd had a chance to study Dearbourn.

The people had prepared their hearts rather than their minds for the blind young man. He'd need kindness and look for sympathy.

They waited. He came. A tallish, spare figure with head lifted as is the way of the blind.

If the postman only saw him arrive, few others met him in the weeks following his arrival. What they discovered when they looked first at him were the burnt-out eyes: what they saw when they looked again were the scarred face and mouth: and on these last their gaze settled uncomfortably. They were remembering a young farmer living nearer Gippeswyk, who'd been blinded by a flame-thrower at Wipers: they'd seen his face and knew

what to expect now: so they said. But this chap Dearbourn had fared worse—he looked scalded. It was cruel. Moreover, there was no mark of a bullet in his neck, such as you couldn't help seeing. Honourable wound and all that. But it was certainly a horrid ugly mark that no man liked to see. There were one or two who looked and said afterwards that they "wore skeered"—for the moment. Young Doris at the baker's saw and was made curious.

"The man look at you and yet he not look. He look through you! Not having his eyes, he look through you with his face. He do!"

There were others who took him for what they would have it he was—an unfortunate young man who deserved their sympathy and should have it.

But they found that he didn't seem to want sympathy.

They were the more curious. Being what he seemed to be, how did he get on with his uncle?

But a few, the shrewder among them, had another question.

How did he get on with his uncle's housekeeper? For they understood that he'd have to be attended to by Diana Cliss.

III

Drowning Marsh may not have been drowning centuries ago. But the popular explanation of the

name requires the world to believe that before erosion did its worst there was a village three miles away to the south-east—that is to say where the sea is now in possession. The inevitable antiquarian, with his instinctive distrust of legend, points out that Drowning Marsh itself, being on high ground, was never a marsh nor could ever have been in danger of submersion by the North Sea. The few inhabitants of the little red houses in the green village retort that if there was not a flood danger in the past, how does he who denies their claim to ancient and romantic perils explain the fact that for centuries men have gone elsewhere to settle, leaving Drowning Marsh to the very small company that has always made up its population?

The facts that survive include these of the small village that never expands, the few and lonely farms, and a certain apparent taciturnity among the people. Living as they do, cut off from the world of men and markets, their seeming habit of silence is actually a cloak easily and even willingly thrown off. For they who have small opportunity to talk, talk hard when a chance offers. Given a theme they are as ready for gossip as the inhabitant of a suburban cottage with a back garden giving "reception" to the speeches of a next-door neighbour.

What distinguished Drowning Marsh was that if you lived in any one of the few houses not

actually in the little village itself, you were so far from even local human contact that you and your affairs could remain unknown to your neighbours for a lifetime.

There was the Black Barn Hall for instance, a good farm ("halls" are farms in Suffolk and if you want to dream of dwelling in marble halls you must think in terms of a "lodge"). It was said that once an old farmer had lain dead for a week in the Black Barn before anybody knew.

Or there was Westerby's.

Nobody knew, or had wanted to know, Westerby. He'd lived in that house for donkey's years, scarcely talking to a soul. He'd die there. It was a poor little place, made poorer by the ways of that man but saved from destruction by his managing housekeeper.

IV

The villagers saw so little of Ezra that they soon almost forgot that the shadow of his being might touch that of theirs. One or two who had seen him out in the fields near the farm, and tried speech, had made nothing of the man. He was so completely negative that you could spend a day trying to define him. The thrusting waters of your curiosity broke on him in vain. Some of his success as an enigma was in debt to the fact that he was blind: you couldn't see those normally most revealing features in the human body, the eyes.

But there was more to it than that, they told themselves. Wherever the man had been, he'd learnt to hold his tongue. It was not that he entirely refused to talk. He was merely reticent about his history and his secret thought. It wasn't a sophisticated reticence: not the case of the strong, silent man. Sometimes he'd use an aggressive vein of satire—crude but effective. More often he preferred hints.

But it occurred to one or two in that bare village that with the coming of the blind man so rarely met a personality had probably been added to Drowning Marsh.

V

The village, deciding that Ezra would have no part in its life, let him go with the observation that perhaps, after all, it wasn't kind to trouble a wounded man with questions. Stir up unhappy memories and so on. Two men, or a man and a woman, would stand at the village-end, see a figure in the distance tap-tapping its way, and nod and whisper, perhaps not displeased with the grim irony of the contrast between the quiet of the scene and the past violence suggested in the blind man's aspect. They didn't come up with him to ask questions. But the merciless determination of village curiosity had won a few facts. He'd come to Drowning Marsh from London, though he'd lived as a boy in Suffolk. His father, an upholsterer,

had gone up early to a job in the Tottenham Court Road, come back to furnish himself with a wife, and returning, had presently bought a small business somewhere in the suburbs. During his son's war service he had died. Ezra had joined up at seventeen in 1918, been sent to France with the rest of the young soldier battalions after the German break-through and, it was understood, though he'd not said so, been wounded and blinded soon after going up the line. He was duly returned to his mother.

Mrs. Dearbourn did not correspond with her brother, who was quite capable of refusing to take in her letters. He hadn't approved of her marriage, piously designing her for his housekeeper, but in the end, without formally forgiving her, had done without her, and from what she'd heard had found a woman that served him very well, a woman named Cliss.

The relationship between Westerby and Mrs. Dearbourn was that existing between many a brother and sister separated by distance and with no affection to keep them together. There is no real enmity. She had gone her own way. There was no more to it. He had no needs now that she could satisfy. When he heard she was dead he had his first news of her since he'd learnt, five years earlier, with successfully subdued distress, that she had become a widow. That would be a lesson to her. He supposed she had a living from the up-

holstery. But when he got a letter from Ezra announcing his mother's death, he had enquired if Ezra was able to manage. Ezra's answer was a frank admission that he could not.

"For one thing I'm blind." For another "nothing doing for us to-day. Everybody get what he want hire-purchase."

Westerby, having lost sight of the family, could not remember that when his sister had written to announce her husband's death she'd mentioned Ezra's blindness. And then Westerby did what astonished his acquaintance. He who'd shown no interest whatever in those of his own blood, who'd allowed himself to forget even that his sister had a son, told Ezra that he could come to Drowning Marsh and expect to find a home there.

"I've no money but you can live at mine while I'm at mine myself."

Why he invited him none knew: some explained it as an example of that inconsistency which is so strictly consistent with all human character. One person who had the best opportunities to study the man, being unable to explain the gesture of apparent kindness and generosity, was content to suspend judgment. Even in an age when agriculture was dealt with on mass-production principles, silk purses were not instantly manufactured from sows' ears.

It was unlikely that he had had any serious intention of yielding to a mild, passing inclination to

be kind to his own blood. But mentioning the young man to his housekeeper, he had heard her say, as she was to remember saying: "You couldn't have him here? Of course not. But it don't matter." The negative might very well have quickened to action his contrary mind and slow-moving cunning. Or so thought the woman, hence her added profession of indifference.

His thought may have been: *I'm* master. I'll show Diana Cliss.

And so Ezra had come with his scarred face, feeling the sharp, salt air of the sea on his cheeks as he was borne in the old black Ford into the high plain of Drowning Marsh.

Tom Tubb, the so-called "boy" of the farm, with his chalk-like face, drove. Himself normally disinclined to talk, he found his passenger embarrassingly silent. He tried to make conversation :

"The farm lay there. You can't see, of course. But that where it lay."

"Oh, aye?"

"We're nigh there now!"

"Oh, aye?"

"Reckon yer don't say a heap!"

There wasn't even an answer to that.

"Well, I hope you'll loike being here, Mister. It seem wun'ful cut-off loike to me. Never fare to see a new face. Never see nobody nor nawthen all the toime: they say a man could be dead a

week in his'n and nobody know."

"Must be a lonely place, Drowning Marsh."

"Lonely? Oi! And where *you* going a rale lot more lonely. Reckon Mr. Westerby and Miss Cliss that do for him never have a visitor even from the village. Lonely? Wun'ful lonely!"

They drove up to the house and Westerby came to the door. He was a bit uncomfortable—after all he was going through the motions of performing an act of kindness and the experience confused him even if it didn't hurt. Also he felt less confident to-day about the attitude of that housekeeper of his. He was a thin, hunched figure of a man with a swollen purple face indifferently hid by a straggly red-grey beard. But the beard did at least disguise the weakness of the chin. He remembered Diana's professed indifference when he'd told her he'd written. But was she really indifferent? He frowned. What matter what her view was? This was his nephew!

VI

When Tubb had driven off in the car, Westerby stood considering Ezra.

"Not much like your mother."

He seemed still to be studying the face of the younger man, studying it with a curious and rather subdued attention. But if what concerned him was actually the scars in the face of his nephew, he did

not say so. He hurried into an explanation of the domestic arrangements while guiding Ezra into his living-room.

"You live in the cottage—there is one on the edge of the farm on the sea side. I can't have you here at mine—there don't be the room here. But if you fare to shift for yourself at the cottage, you're welcome." He paused before going on to say words that were to have their importance in one life at least.

"Sometimes Diana here can give you a look, though she live at mine to see to me."

He nodded jauntily at a middle-aged woman who had followed them into the room. He'd show her! But the woman seemed suddenly to be smiling, as if she'd made up her mind to agree. The woman, Diana Cliss, had grey hair cut short at the back, blue Suffolk eyes, a big generous mouth with a significant pucker at the corners, and a figure the fulness of which was half concealed by old but well-cut brown tweeds. She seemed to have decided to accept cheerfully her master's intention in respect to his nephew, though about it she had what seemed to her herself a very curious doubt. When she spoke, it was the fact of acquiescence that Westerby noticed. But what was open to strangers to observe was the fact that in her voice was her special grace. When she said, carelessly, "Reckon you'll soon settle down!" there was a soft and perhaps unexpected music in the room. The

young man smiled in a reserved way, and muttered his thanks.

He seemed more at ease.

"But you won't git much company!" she warned.

"Perhaps I'll get all I want," he answered.

For a moment she looked at him and it almost seemed as if he returned her stare.

VII

Diana Cliss, as Westerby had half hoped, actually was not pleased by Ezra's arrival. She considered that at her age she should not be called on to submit to changes in the daily round. A blind young man couldn't be of any use in the work of the little farm. But she knew that her real objection was something much more obscure than any she'd expressed. It was something odd, dark, and only explicable in the sense that it had to do with her master much more than his nephew. Still, she said aloud, if this Ezra kept to his cottage—and he seemed wishful to keep to himself—did for himself as he must have learnt to do by now, and didn't become a "nuisance," she'd look in sometimes to tidy up.

Diana professed to think her christian name absurd. She concealed her sense of obligation to the parents who had given her such a dashing patronymic. Following a hint she'd picked up, she had

once, when in Gippeswyk, taken the opportunity to visit the library and look up the history of the most celebrated of Dianas. *She* had never hunted and never would, but it was highly exciting to have the style of a great huntress (the book had told her that the famous Diana was that). She owed the name to the fact that her mother had been maid in a family where one of the "young ladies" was a Diana. The young lady had been her godmother but had subsequently gone out to India and died there. Miss Cliss was now the only Diana known to herself. As to that voice of hers—that golden instrument—she had seen enough to know that the young man had received comfort from it. She was accustomed to the thought that her voice gave pleasure. There had been a time when she had been told it ought to be trained. Her mother had listened to the suggestion. Her father had not frowned on it. It was Diana who had professed indifference, and when she heard that money, and much money, would be needed she threw the idea aside. She had always wanted an active life in the fields with her father. She decided to continue milkmaid, general hand. The idea of voice-training was buried for ever. She had professed never to have regretted the fact. Her work in the Land Army during the war had further sealed those early suggestions of the musical platform. As a land N.C.O. she'd been an overwhelming success.

"Good thing I never let myself go for a singer."

At forty-five Diana, without being much concerned to do so, was managing to conceal the fact that she was putting on weight. You had to draw close before realising that her figure wasn't that of a young woman: she went to a good tailor. Not that she really hid her age. Her rather large, plain face was lined and her cropped hair was quite grey. Her fine blue eyes considered the world steadily; but what most impressed the onlooker was her general air of competence. You had a feeling that this woman, humble though her station, limited though her education and homely though her appearance and deportment were, could easily, with a little training, have managed some much larger enterprise than Westerby's small dairy farm. It was thought by those who knew her that, having given up all ideas of marriage, she had settled with herself to run the farm in a shrewd, half-masculine way that asked for no concessions and gave none. When the dairy at Stowe proposed to Westerby to reopen the question of prices and he had hesitated—as he had a habit of doing nowadays—she had gone over on her heavy bicycle and said "no" bluntly. She knew few women of her own or, for that matter, any other age. She preferred a tailor once every two years to a dressmaker every other month, and said so.

As to men, she had come to regard them with a mixture of impatience, indifference and con-

tempt. They were not souls to be explored: they were creatures in some way or other concerned with work—with the maintenance of one's temporal requirements. One man paid you your wages, another man helped your master to find it possible to pay any wages at all. In Ezra Dearbourn she could see nothing more than a creature who might make it a little less easy for her master to pay her. But, poor young man, you must be as kind as you could—as kind as you'd got time for.

As for Ezra, he appeared diffident. Perhaps the affliction that had come upon him so suddenly had made him more so. He seemed resolved to keep out of the way of the farm except when there was work to be done that he could do. But, presently, he began to look restless. It was noticed that he went oftener in the direction of his uncle's little house—if sometimes he turned back. Yet it did not appear that Westerby gave him much encouragement.

Diana noticed that he kept away as much as he could and was inclined to bless him for it. Poor young man, he could only be in the way. The "boy," Tom Tubb, could sometimes find him a job. But they didn't want him in the house and he showed his sense by keeping to his cottage.

She thought once or twice of late, however, that he'd approached the farm-house and then retreated. She hoped he was not the sort of young man who'd borrow from his uncle.

Tubb, who approved of help, was quite ready to admit that he was really beginning to be useful: that he could use a curry-comb and rub down the horse "a treat."

"Wun'ful clever he dew be gittin'."

Well, so long as he kept away from the farm-house itself . . .

VIII

Ezra had for a month been settled in his lonely cottage. He had remained there unvisited and unknown. It was now that the experience came to Diana Cliss.

Ezra had impressed her in only one way—by his rather determined silence. He had volunteered no talk of his past. Once the war had been mentioned, but he had let the allusion go. He made only passing and necessary reference to his affliction, as, for instance, when he could not discover where something he required was kept. He did not talk, and the few people who might have visited him soon desisted. Yet in a way of his own he was civil. He did not dramatise either his blindness or his silence. She thought she had a clear idea of the man.

She was now to have that impression startlingly recast. She was at work in the sitting-room that Westerby had used as an office and where he had worked till he'd turned over all the accounts to her.

The time, as she remembered always, was early —not later than eight o'clock. It was a morning of soft blue skies and soft June airs, when the scent of rose and honeysuckle sought the open windows so that they could pass their fragrance to men that kept the house. The grass still glistened with the dew; a big thrush whose speckles you could see as he perched on the top of a pole-like poplar, sang triumphantly. Blackbirds gave him back some part of his music.

As for Diana, she worked. She hadn't time for birds just now nor yet for scents. She did not say she *never* had time . . .

Presently she heard a footfall.

She turned round and saw Ezra. She was busy. She was making up the accounts for the month or rather writing out "to account rendered." For the Stowe Imperial Dairy had not paid last month. They were getting slack. She frowned. They had always been careless. But now she didn't know. *Was* it carelessness?

Ezra. She frowned again. He had a way of coming in unannounced. If she did not make a sound of some sort she could not be sure that he knew she was there. He often came when she was busy, but couldn't know that unless she told him. No good in saying "Can't you see I'm busy?"

She was busy now. There were some tradesmen's bills to check. If she did not check them she might be overcharged. She did not speak to Ezra

and he stood there silent. She snatched up the bills, shooting a keen glance at their items. She enjoyed now, as she often did, a momentary sense of herself as the woman with no frills—the masculine woman who could not be fooled, who claimed to be treated as a man. Yes, they all knew her for that. She'd once overheard a man say of her in the market at Gippeswyk: "She's as smaart as they make 'em—if she *dew* be a bit homely-loike!"

She had scarcely winced at the qualification, though she remembered it afterwards.

She turned over a second bill and then straightened herself. She caught a glimpse of herself in the little looking-glass. Homely? What you called middle-aged?

But there was Ezra. He was still standing there. His immobility slightly annoyed her. She was active. She was being extremely active at the moment. This man couldn't help himself but he was standing there . . . standing. Doing nothing. Where there was always a heap to do. Not that he could do anything for her or Westerby.

And she did not even know that he knew she was in the room. She'd made no sound except rustle a paper, and he might not have noticed that.

She cleared her throat. Then she spoke:

"Good marnin'. Reckon you're out early. You did not expect to find me here?"

"Reckon I did. Reckon I know when you fare to come in here."

She turned and looked at him. She had a countrywoman's dislike of being watched. She knew now that he had known she was in the room from the beginning. But she was determined to challenge him.

"Well, I wore here. Yes, before you come in. I see you come in."

"I know that. I come in because I knew you wore here——"

"But your uncle don't reckon to come down for an hour."

"I know that too."

Diana frowned again. He knew a great deal —too much, did this young man. She didn't like to think that he studied their habits so carefully.

She thought now he was taking a step in her direction. Presumably the sound of her voice guided him. She threw aside the bills. They were checked. Her work here was done. She'd go and give the poultry their hot mash. A bit early, but then she'd got into the work early. The young man could sit here or go into the garden.

But Ezra was coming closer. His hand was out as if feeling for the furniture. She put out a hand to prevent him stumbling over a chair. He caught her hand and held it, and then came on.

Afterwards she used to wonder if the first hint she received came to her as she felt his thin fingers on her smaller but more powerful ones. She drew

him forward and then half-guided him into the chair.

"You'd better sit down and rest." Rest was for such as he, poor young feller. Nor for her. No. *She* must be going.

She found that, though she'd made him sit down, he still held her hand. She began to draw it away—to find that he still held it. She looked down with a mixture of annoyance and pure surprise.

It was then that she was arrested by something odd in his expression.

Where she stood she could still see herself in the looking-glass. She could see both herself and him. There was a little flush in his cheek: and he had hold of her hand.

For a single moment she would have wrenched her hand away. And then she yielded. She did not understand—yet. But she was beginning to understand—the first surprise was now becoming an overwhelming astonishment. It seemed to her, not only that this man had changed but that the world was changing.

Something happened to some women sometimes. It had never happened to her. She had never troubled herself to think that it could happen. She had presently decided that it could not. But . . . it seemed as if something of the kind was happening now.

It was terrible and lovely and impossible and

absurd. All these things: but it was also true.

He was holding her hand still. And saying "Diana."

He'd always called her respectfully "Miss Cliss." She'd not noticed that he did so, so little had she attended to him; but she knew that he could not have said anything else.

He said "Diana" now—very softly and slowly. She had to answer. She was expected to answer. She said "Yes." She felt awkward, and hung her head. She was overcome with wonder. But she was . . . yes, a thing she could not have believed possible. She was—shy. What would they think in the market if they could see her—if they could surprise her into showing shyness?

"Yes?" she said again. She wanted to encourage him but she didn't know what words to use. What did girls—women—say?

Girls—women. She had made that correction before she realised what she had done and what was involved by what she had done. And for a moment she was too much moved to examine the thought. He was caressing her hand. He was saying: "I—I reckon I want to be friends. . . . But I say to myself a man that be loike me and fare to speak to such as her have a praper nerve."

"Oh . . . I don't know what you mean."

"Reckon, then, perhaps you'll let me explain. But I think—she could never look at me—at a man that dew be loike what I am——"

She started. She understood. She looked with a swift, new and immense compassion at his sightless eyes. But she understood something else. If the man was apologising for speaking when he was blind, he must mean more than just what the lads called a "frisk." He meant . . . Yes . . . He meant *that*. He offered her—love. He wanted to walk out. Walking out meant that one day you married. He wanted things like that. He wanted *her*. She who had lived for forty-five years, who had always been "homely" and who was now middle-aged and grey, was sought by a lover!

She felt newly choked by the sweetness of the thought. He saw her in some magic terms—the terms in which, as she had always understood, men saw women they desired.

She caught a glimpse of herself—and of him. His sightless eyes upon her face. And then like a blow, it came. The idea that had been struggling.

He did not see her in magic terms. Because he could not see.

He thought she was young, like himself.

IX

It took her several seconds to assimilate that idea. In the meantime she was accepting his timid caresses—enjoying them, loving them. They were lovelier than anything she had ever dreamed. She had already searched her memory for thoughts she

had had as a young woman. They had been shy and excited thoughts when she had been in her 'teens: after that she had come to recognise that love wasn't for her, and had absorbed herself in the work of the farm. Sometimes, yes, she had let her mind stray: but not often and not far.

She had never had any conception that it would be like this. No woman ever imagines the experience as it is when it comes to her first.

The fact that Diana had only enjoyed this experience for five minutes had nothing to do with the quality of the experience. It was something that took no account of time. It existed in its own, strictly eternal dimension. It was hers apart from the duration of her life or of her other sensations. She had always been loved—always. She would always be loved.

And now suddenly, after this new eternity of almost choking happiness, she must lose what was hers. *Hers*, as her heart fiercely declared! But as her mind sank to the bottom of the pit of despair, as she saw herself robbed, despoiled, as she saw life's richest promise being broken—there came to her another lightning discovery. He thought she was his own age had been her first thought. He could not know otherwise was her second. It was highly improbable that Mr. Westerby would ever mention the matter of her age. It was almost certain that Ezra would not ask—he was too tender, too chivalrous and too convinced of her youth to ask.

He would never know unless she told him.
She need not tell him.
She would not tell him . . . yet.

X

They met now when they could. But she always contrived not to sit "agin" him, as they said in the country. She believed, at the moment, that she was governed by new, virginal hesitations. But later she knew what her heart had been crying. . . . Why should he know—know that she was so much older than himself? . . . Why should the lines of her body be allowed to betray her? She must subdue them: it could be done. . . . She'd read . . .

She must hold him now if she was to hold him afterwards.

And so, close enough to hold hands, they sat. They did not talk very much. He said there was a great deal to tell her but that now there would be plenty of time. He did not plan the future. She did not ask any questions—even mental ones. If she had done so she could very likely have satisfied herself, even from the worldly point of view.

Westerby was a bachelor and Ezra was his only relative. Just now Diana had no mind for material considerations, but she had supposed that his object in bringing the young man to the place at all was so

that some day any bit of property there remained could pass to the only member of the family alive —and that one a young man "that have something owing to him, I reckon, for going over yonder and gittin' his eyes put out."

Nothing had been arranged, but she supposed that Ezra would presently learn enough to be able to direct the boy to take the milk to the dairy and —yes—she *had* had the thought and suffered it with a frown—he would probably, some day, give *her* orders. . . . Or give 'em till she was too old.

She scarcely allowed herself now to look into the future. She did not now remember frowning at the thought that she would come under his orders "until she was too old." She lived strictly and exquisitely in the present. She sat listening, less to his words than to what she could believe was his happiness—his happiness in her, in having her close.

He never talked much: he avoided openings; he disliked questions. But like most men who disliked questions he gave a little information so as to reduce curiosity. He told her briefly how he'd come to the village. He had not expected to like his uncle. His mother hadn't liked him and he, Ezra, had been sorry he'd come—"though, of course, I'm grateful to the man that give me a roof." But if he had had better fortune in the business in London he'd have declined to come at all. He hadn't been able to carry on, once his

mother had died. So he'd accepted his uncle's offer. "I reckon perhaps I wore a fool to go and live with an old man. Then I hear your voice. And I think—that's a rare sweet voice—that young girl dew be different——"

"Young girl?" For a moment Diana forgot.

"Whoi *you*, of course!"

It caught her like the stab of a knife.

XI

Ezra was noticeably more expansive. Tom Tubb that worked for Westerby and gave, because he had to, grave attention to the smallest command of Diana Cliss puzzled himself about that theer Ezra Dearbourn. "He sit inside himself as you might say. No, not runty loike. Not unfriendly—just nawthen. Nawthen. . . . But he smile at me this marnin'. Give me a good-day loike as if he feel glad to see me—not that he can see anybody, come to that." The last was added as a fact and not by way of commiseration.

Tom Tubb was a sufficient register of the atmosphere now prevailing in that cottage of Ezra's. Something did seem to have happened. For different people the effect may have been different in detail. But substantially, the personality of Ezra had in some way expanded. He spoke with more assurance when he spoke at all. "He look like a man with a secret," somebody'd said. "As if he

can't remember that thing that happen to him in the war without shuddering like." There was now visible less of that instinctive reserve of the sufferer. The scarred face would be lifted on the few occasions when a footfall sounded near the door.

For a man who'd not been blind all his life, he'd acquired the ready apprehensions of the sightless in a remarkable way. But these apprehensions were more acute than ever now. Diana was the first to notice the development. She read in him satisfaction and perhaps astonishment at her attitude. He'd told her that—"I think when I come and for long after that you wore unfriendly loike. You think, and I don't blame you, that me coming here make a heap of inconvenience. I'm what you might call an intruder—and I reckon to myself, she think me a wun'ful nuisance."

She had made it clear that she must not be seen in his company. She had told him that he must only come to see her when she was alone and that he must never speak of her to anybody. She had made her terms confidently. And so he'd told her, turning his head quizzically, "You sound praper firm. A man expect that more from older women. It don't be that you're cold loike. But you do fancy being secret, don't you?"

"Don't *you*?" she said. He'd started at that in rather an odd way. But he'd laughed in the end.

"You keep secret, if you want to, my dear. Young mawthers, as I've heard, dew be loike that."

"As you've heard and as you *know*?" she twitted him. He didn't seem to like being twitted. He frowned.

But again he answered her with a laugh. "I reckon a young mawther loike a secret because it happen to *be* a secret."

He also told her that what filled him with gratitude was her acceptance of him without even a hint that he was a helpless blind man. She told him that a blind man that was blinded in the war would make any woman want to come close. She knew that the element of heroism in the man's story did add immensely to his significance in her eyes.

She wanted first, a lover: but a hero lover was something that she could have had no right to hope for. And yet such a lover was hers. And so she told him. She laughed happily, if tremulously: for all this new happiness of hers was tremulous. On what did it rest? On the most aerial foundations. A puff of wind could blow it away. A single inquisitive glance might discover the situation existing between Ezra and herself and end it.

In the meantime she believed she could rely on the man's silence. Silence, indeed, seemed to be natural to this strange creature. If, since he had discovered her, he had shown a greater willingness

for contact with others, there was an evident inexperience in such contacts.

Inexperience? The inexperience of the captive released, rather than of the creature that has never known freedom. The bird leaves the cage but doesn't at once settle to its liberty.

He had his "funny" ways of talking. She thought more or less about the captivity symbol because, once, he'd used it.

"It's loike getting out into the sun, talking to you."

"You talk as if you'd been locked up."

"Well. It sound loike that." He laughed, not lightly. His laughter was seldom light. "I never wore locked up," he volunteered. "But I've heard that them as have been lose their way in loife when they come out."

She stood listening: but staring also. She hurried to change the theme. He must think of her: not trouble himself with these gloomy speculations.

"Will you think of something brighter than that to tell me?"

She was astonished at her own ease in commanding him.

"I will. I'm sorry. A mawther don't want to be troubled by the things that come to a man that sit all day thinking. You be happy, my dear, and I'll be happy too!"

He fell silent.

She moved about the room doing the things that came to her hand. He did not break in upon her again.

When she had finished and could no longer pretend that there remained a shelf to dust or a chair to thrust into its proper place, she stood in the doorway looking down at him. He knew she was there. But he did not speak. He sat silent, sightlessly gazing into space, as if for him a pattern was being woven there.

But he smiled quite happily when she spoke:

"I'm going now."

"You come over here first, my dear!"

XII

Westerby's house lay in a hollow on the sea side of the village, so that if you looked anywhere inland you met a wide expanse of green with a ridge lined by big trees in the furthest distance west and a blue mist low down with a hint of a sail to the south and south-west, where was the river. But going forward to the sea the wayfarer, having risen to the high plain, found a stretch of land with none of that grateful element of variety which pleased the eye looking inland. There was even something a little grim about these straight, flat fields, spreading themselves towards the sea. There was here plough and there meadow-land for Westerby's cattle. A crag path

ran straight from his door to the cliff top, but unless there was talk of a regatta of the big yachts from Harwich to be seen the people from the village went rarely that way.

"Our place seem lonely enough, without going to look for a place where you never see a sail."

When they wanted escape they went inland to where the road to Gippeswyk ran away with hints of cities and the activities of men.

Diana liked the sea road. She made it her promenade. She made it her walk on the afternoon following her strange encounter with Ezra, pushing on against the wind that blew slant-wise across the plain. She expected opposition and normally enjoyed it; but she did not go to the wind for revival. She said she didn't know what it was to be tired.

But when she had walked for a little now with the wind playing upon her hot cheeks, she realised that to-day she had need of it. She hadn't known that she was tired. But then she hadn't known her need for the experience that had so completely overwhelmed her.

The wind that revived her when she didn't know she needed it made a reminder of that immensely larger need in her life of which she had been so little conscious. The experience wasn't hers alone; but this she did not know, nor know that another had told how:

While on I walked, a comfort seemed to touch
A heart that had not been disconsolate:
Strength came where weakness was not known to be,
At least not felt; and restoration came
Like an intruder knocking at the door
Of unacknowledged weariness.

XIII

Diana marched forward, exulting. From the top of the cliff she looked towards a sea that was turning grey, as across the blue of the sky the heavy clouds gathered. She liked grey seas, though without knowing that she did. In fact if she'd been asked she would have said that of course she loved blue skies.

One of her discoveries about herself to-day was that she had it in her to respond to things that before she had known nothing of; the mystery of grey skies, the song of a lark: the greenness of grass.

She even found herself once or twice staring, not at the sky so much as at herself, as it were reflected there.

Why was the world from sky to earth under her foot magical? What was there in wind and sea that seemed joined to herself, so that she *was* wind and the wind was she? Why did she find herself upon the crest of those seas below? Coming to the cliff top she stared, first at the shingle beach with its scattered big boulders so brightly ochre even in

the grey light, and then at the grey, swelling sea where not a breaker showed, excited as the water seemed. And as she looked down, steadily now, she found that here, too, was some new magic. Memories of tales she had heard and listened to, if at all, with impatience breaking into scorn, shot back into her mind, rather than drifted there. Memories can explode. She found herself suddenly occupied with these stories she had laughed at: particularly was she remembering that "they said"—those mysterious impersonal voices that somehow contrived to join dim past with gossiping present—that out of sight, below those grey seas, was the village that once had lain so close to Drowning Marsh—the village of Sea Capel. Once it had been a big hamlet, almost large enough to be called a small town. To it, so the gossips told, went the people of Drowning Marsh for all the necessities that now they must search inland for, going as far as Gippeswyk.

"They say everything that a man want could be got there." She was remembering and knew why she was remembering this particular passage in the oft-told tale. "There wore a butcher. Baker. Tailor. He fit you out with what they wear in those times. There wore *two* tailors! And there wore a man that make tombstones. And a man that own a lot of ships. And, of course, fishermen with their boats. Big enough to trawl. And you had to go there to git buried: and you had to go there to git married."

Sentimental misses, to her infinite contempt, had sometimes told how they'd looked over the cliff and wondered. "Should think you'd have more sense," Diana had retorted.

One more bold than the rest had said: "You wait."

Her answer had been a snort.

It wouldn't have been a snort to-day. She felt an infinite fool but she knew what she was looking for: she was looking for some spirit to rise out of the waves at the familiar point two miles to the south-east where the village had been.

How they'd laugh if they knew. But they didn't know. They would never know. She'd still show them if they became impertinent.

But in the meantime she could dare to look. And then she knew that she did not only look . . .

She, Diana Cliss, stood on the edge of the cliff and listened.

She remembered that one of them fool mawthers had told how, if you were in love, you could hear the bells, separating their sound from that of the sea; the bells in the tower of the church to which the people of Drowning March, five hundred years ago, had had to go to be married.

She listened, waited, listened still.

Did she hear . . . the wedding-bells . . . now?

XIV

Who was it who had said: when you can't see, you can hear?

But she *was* seeing—seeing a tower that was not there.

But was there not somebody else—a blind man who saw what was not there . . . a girl out of the past . . . herself?

CHAPTER II

At first Diana believed that she intended, only not immediately, to part with her new and astonishing happiness. She told herself that she asked merely for another day with a lover. It could only be another day.

But while she told herself it could only be another day, she was asking herself if that was true. And having told Ezra not to talk, and having determined in her own strong mind that they should never be seen together, she decided that for the time being there was nothing to fear. She could go from day to day. If she suffered a hesitation on Ezra's account, she reminded herself that not she alone had been made happy by her consent to accept his addresses: he had been made happy—so happy that it would be the height of cruelty to deprive a blind man of what must now be consolation and joy to him in the midst of his affliction.

Superficially the situation was absurd and liable to destruction at any moment. But lovers—even new lovers, even lovers who are lovers for the first time—can look very far below the surface to the roots and to the foundations of things. This woman-lover looked at once and so deeply that

she knew that love is an immediate experience and that a man unknown one moment may be loved with the entire soul in the next moment, and loved from that first moment to eternity. Also she knew that love not only can and must triumph over the worst physical difficulties but can neutralise the effects of the irony that fate sometimes contrives. A situation that would be grotesque in other circumstances is subdued by love to nobility and beauty.

But these comforting thoughts notwithstanding, she knew that no moment was free from danger. To remember the means she must use to protect herself from that danger filled her with bitter shame. But she did not forget that she must not let Ezra speak a word in the presence of others who would tell him the truth. . . .

There was something else. She flushed when she thought of it. A man, even if blind, who took a woman in his arms, might—guess. Whatever the temptation to yield, she must keep him at a distance. He should touch her hand, but she must refuse to let him embrace her until . . . She thought, and knew she thought, like the old maid she was. She could not help doing so. But she knew what she intended, if instinctively she hid her own ends even from herself. She would hold him off, keep him eager to have her and make him dependent on her—on her talk, her touch.

Ultimately she would have so bound him to an

imagined woman that he would think the truth irrelevant. The policy, like all her policies, was bold: it was only its special character that made her anxious.

"You shall come to love me so, oh my dear," her heart not actually finding words, cried out—"you shall come to love me so that the discovery that I am old will count for nothing. You shall so desire to possess me that the reminder that I am not the girl your mind has conjured will be unheard."

She stood for a moment, thinking and trembling.

But whatever her secret fears, she was outwardly as assured of manner as ever. This morning she intended going to Gippeswyk. She went into the stable-garage and overlooked the Ford. Then she called Tom. He knew her well and feared her tongue enough to see to it that the car was ready for the time she named.

"Oh, you've cleaned her to-day, I see. Not *half-done*, this time."

"It wore cleaned *last* time, Miss."

"Yes, and it had better be!" said Diana grimly. She found an odd pleasure this morning in making the sullen Tubb realise his total inferiority to a woman with a mind.

She entered the car and moved off. She nodded curtly to the young man. The young man? She had a young man of her own!

It had astonished Diana nevertheless to find that having a man didn't make her modify her attitude to a world of men. Rather, indeed, did she find herself, as now, studying to be characteristic of herself whether she went to market or moved about Stowe. She wore rough tweeds and big boots when she went among the folk, as she'd always done. There must be no suspicion of a change in her.

She didn't know that Tom Tubb had begun to notice that she "wore a heap tidier loike" in the early morning. But he didn't know much. He was not likely to know what was Diana's purpose in going to Gippeswyk.

Stopping outside Rentleys, the big drapers, she reflected on her wisdom in not buying in Stowe, where her purchases might be noticed. But nobody in this great town would be likely to ask "Why's that woman from Westerby's suddenly taken to doll herself up?"

She stood on the kerb looking into the windows uneasily. Then she drew closer. There was that pale-blue frock. But suddenly she thrust her glance into the adjoining window, where there were rolls of cloth, curtains, material and so on. She'd seen a Drowning Marsh face—Mrs. Ashplant—wife of Westerby's landlord—in a car. Diana examined the reflection of the street provided by a mirror in the window. She saw that Mrs. Ashplant had only slowed. She had now gone on. She

wouldn't presently come up with a "*You* looking at pretty frocks! I never thought . . ."

She knew all about Mrs. Ashplant's clothes—since last Sunday. Hadn't she studied her lines, seen that the woman knew how to dress so as to bring out her madonna-like air? It wasn't the style for oneself. But one had got useful hints. For herself, she decided, she could use more colour. She'd have something blue—*real* blue, for being a daughter of the country of Constable she had a sense of colour.

She smiled into the shop, the only big provincial drapers able to boast that they had not been secretly bought by some London store. She hoped she wasn't known there.

"I want a blue frock—a true blue. No, not a thing like that. *That*'s more . . ."

She was being shown the garment, and had even had it carried to the street door so that she could see it in the light of day. She was coming back to the counter. Suddenly she halted. The assistant who, though true Suffolk, was beginning to say Moddom quite easily and naturally, found herself staring at her customer.

"I—I've made a mistake!" Diana, the self-possessed, was stumbling in and out of an apology. And a mistake she had indeed made! She was buying colour. She should have been buying texture. He could not *see*. He could only touch. She began all over again.

II

It was only for a few days more, she told herself. It wasn't as if she was robbing him of some other, younger woman. No ordinary woman would want a blind man—and when she felt she could, she'd tell him. It would be cruel to tell him just now. He would certainly be bitterly disappointed. Also, if she told him, he might even be made to feel absurd.

Yet before returning to the car-park she stood hesitating before making a bolt into a chemist's opposite.

"I want some noice scents . . ." He could enjoy a fragrance if not see a colour.

"And," with what she hoped was a frank smile, "I would like something—you know . . . that take down one's weight."

Did some women go in and ask quite boldly and bluntly?

She looked about her eagerly as she drove home. She was always doing that now. For her new interest in dress and cosmetics was, to her astonishment, accompanied by an extraordinary new awareness of country sounds and scents. She did not, at first, recognise the fact that she now had time to pause and look at rose and tree: that she now found delight in wind and bird-song. These new delights came into her possession unawares. She was enjoying before she knew she was.

But she was shrewd for all her readiness to be romantic. She began at last to understand. Love was related to beauty. Love enlarged your vision so that your response to natural loveliness was instinctive and profound. Love interpreted natural beauty as actual beauty interpreted love.

In the car she tried to think she'd shown the indifference she had not felt. But . . . would the thing be effective? And what a fool she was! How she would have scorned any other woman who did as she!

Still, it was only for a few days more: and if she succeeded a little in . . . changing herself—why not? The few days might last a little longer: also . . . she need not be so careful to keep out of his reach. Calling herself a fool, still she did not know that she was trying to deal with the comically tragic situation of so many women of her age.

It had enclosed her in circumstances and made her ridiculous whatever she did. The man's illusion made her a fool: her acceptance of the result of his illusion made her knave and fool—but fool most of all.

She had passed the age when a woman can expect to create passion in man. Unlike most others of her sex she had not rebelled because love had missed her: she had believed she hadn't wanted it. One of the most astonishing things about the whole affair of Ezra was her discovery that not only was

she loved but that she had always wanted to be loved.

She wondered what the experience of others was: and, still wondering, had a new, curious and by no means welcome experience: she was brought into contact with the recorded emotions of lovers: she found herself reading a line of love poetry.

III

Diana had a very small library of prose works inherited from her father. She would never have bought them; but having them, she was proud of them. It was her comfortable reflection that they were not verse. She was not at all pleased when, as happened at the Christmas previous to Ezra's coming, she found herself with opportunities to enjoy some of the best poetry in the language.

Westerby had come in on Christmas morning and thrown a calendar on the table.

"Here, that's for you!"

She thanked him, while showing no pleasure. She understood perfectly well. He was giving her a tear-off calendar. He was giving it to himself. He'd had a tear-off the year before with homely proverbs set out on it: he'd not looked at them but he'd been satisfied they were nothing worse. He'd decided he liked tear-offs because the date was always printed very large and there was no bunk about it. He'd got to give Diana something:

he'd marched into a shop in Gippeswyk and demanded a tear-off.

"What kind, sir?"

"Any kind." The one nearest his hand had a picture of a cow. "That'll do."

It would do for Diana. He'd now saved himself buying her another gift while providing for his own needs.

She understood: she may have reflected later that a selfish man may be hoist with his own petard.

He was eyeing the gift over her shoulder—though whether a suspicion was even then being kindled, who shall say?

"Here. What's it all about? I never look. Tear-off—anything'll do, I say. That's what they give me."

"You didn't look?" She glanced at him, half resentfully. She'd no gratitude for the gift: but that was merely a negative sentiment. With her suspicion strengthening as to the precise character of the offering, there was something more positive in her attitude—anger.

It was perfectly clear what he'd brought—poetry. It was a calendar with poetical quotations—one for each day.

They stared at the object with a perfect unison of distaste. It was doubtful if their minds had ever been more in accord.

"Who read such stuff, can't think!" he said.

"Nor I!"

"Potry, they call it. I forgit to say 'none o' that' when I buy the thing!"

"Can't be helped now. I just take off the cap! So now we can't send it back."

"Reckon we got to keep him. But it seem a wun'ful shame."

"Well, it was your own doing, Mr. Westerby."

"Well, yes," with an angry snort.

But there was agreement that the thing, having entered their home, it must be borne with stoically. And so Diana had cheerfully snatched off the top sheet every morning without a glance at the legend below the date. It was when Ezra had made himself known to her in his new and lovely character that she found herself one day gazing down at the calendar in curiosity mingled with alarm. She knew what she had an impulse to do and why she had it. Poetry. . . . She'd read in the *Home and Farm Life Weekly* that poetry was the way lovers told their secrets. The thought hadn't pleased her but it had certainly set her thinking. To what did this stuff amount? Could it be of the smallest service in her life?

With a sense of highly disagreeable adventure she came close enough to read:

> Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
> Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
> Never met—or never parted—
> We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Her first thought was that one word was twice mis-spelt: her second was of the last word in the second line. Her final thought was dark and troubled. . . .

She read the last line again.

CHAPTER III

For Diana the days passed as if on tiptoe—holding their breath—pointing—whispering as she whispered back—counting—"one more day won from the impossible."

She became adventurous. Though she had never known it, adventure was in her blood. More than ever conscious of danger, she forgot all perils as she remembered her lover. There were times when she sought to estimate her love and practised upon it that denigration which more sophisticated lovers use to prove their passion. Was she merely flattered because a man believed himself drawn to her? What experience had she of her heart in such a searching predicament as the present exquisite one? Was she moved by nothing more than the intolerable vanities of an old maid?

But then her heart, escaping from the inquisition, would cry out with a voice from what might have been her far-away girlhood: has a woman no rights, no title to whatever love may bring her?

Why must she be tortured by the thought of the grotesqueness of her situation? Why must she be haunted always by ideas such as her quick intelligence only too easily framed for her—such a thought as that any jury of the most simple,

the most tolerant and the most kindly people in the world would pronounce her guilty of an act of folly and deceit as fantastic as anything recorded in the history of romance. Her rights? They would say she had none. But she was even without wisdom. The situation she attempted to maintain could not live a week: the first whisper of the truth must blow up the whole thing.

Her trembling answer to all that was, that by virtue of the miracle involved when the thing was brought into being, the thing continued.

And as for her self-questioning, her search for an assurance that she loved with passion and reality and that her love had nothing of the fantasy of the circumstances that made love possible, she came to ultimate knowledge of the reality of her feelings on an afternoon when she had set out for one of her lonely walks in the direction of the sea. She knew she dare not "go for a walk" with Ezra. Not that he'd suggested it. He had submitted to her law that in no circumstances, "for the present," must they be seen out together. The hint, that some day she might lift the embargo, had no real meaning, though there were times when she tried to believe that it had. He regularly paced the ground, round the farm, sometimes ascending to the stile, crossing it and walking a mile towards the village. But it occurred to her one day that he had no real liking for company or even for being abroad alone.

She walked straight out of the hollow without calling at Ezra's cottage. The glances of Tubb had begun to make her uncomfortable. Tubb was standing in the yard, his dark eyes, in his chalk-like face, shining with what looked to her a sort of suppressed malice. She knew he did not love her: too often she'd had to give him a touch of the whip of her tongue. She knew that he had devils of cruelty in his heart: she'd caught him twisting the tail of a cat, throwing flints, selected for the sharpness of their points, at cows that didn't come in quickly enough: she'd threatened him, and not always with her tongue only, so that he'd given surly promises of reform. Tubb wasn't a person to trust. And one of these days she'd have to settle up with him. But just now—no——

She came up out of the little green hollow and was met at once by what seemed to her a welcoming gust from the sea. This was from such a sea as she loved. There would, she knew, be visible life in it to-day, life that would communicate itself to her veins. She found that since she had learnt to love, the current of her vitality depended more than before on natural stimulus. She consciously needed air and sun to-day. But, on the other hand, when these sources of life reached her troubled or exhausted senses, they vitalised as never before. The natural visible world could make her anew: fill her with such vitality that she was ready to call out, to run, to clap her hands. She sometimes found her-

self staring at the waving branches of a high, slim tree as if she asked, "And did you always have power to excite me if I had only known it?" A starling singing on a chimney-pot from which came no smoke to distract it from its song, not only made her look up in perfectly unpremeditated happiness, but with real astonishment that he could have the meaning for her to-day that he seemed to have. But nothing surprised her more than the effect of the sea, and the wind from the sea, upon her spirit to-day. For these had always refreshed her—if they had not seemed to be allied to the secret forces of love and joy. Now, however, they revealed qualities that she knew not. They not only enlarged their power of revival: they charged her imagination with an extraordinary power of perception—perception of life and, above all, of those elements in love that words not only cannot express but that were, as it seemed to her, never intended for expression. They gave her precisely the experiences that could reach her heart from no other sources. Love that perceived the imperceptible understood and taught the lover to understand that the most significant things could never be signified. If she sometimes suspected that what she was learning was no more than any other woman who had been in love, she was content to remain. She was content to remain now—with the sea-wind blowing in her face and the smell of the sea rising to her nostrils. She pressed forward over the

high plain, green except where poppies made fire in the blown grasses, or where the red crag of the subsoil shone like crude gold from path or pit. Presently, from over her, a lark, minute, quivering, ecstatic, bestowed a blessing upon her, its wings joining in its song. She began to be happy. She came now to a wire fence that divided the pasture from the open common and was designed to keep cattle from the dangers of the cliff. She stepped over it without difficulty, as so often she had done. It was then that, drawing near to the cliff head, she started and came to a stop, shading her eyes as she did so. Far from her, as it seemed to her now, though the cliff had looked close a moment before, she could see the standing figure of a man. She knew the man: she knew and her heart was suddenly sick with terror. For what she saw was Ezra; Ezra standing upon the cliff edge. If he took a false step now, he must fall . . .

She did not call out. She began to run. She was in new terror lest he should hear her coming and move carelessly. She saw that he had a stick. Was he sure to put it out to test for ground and foothold? She could not be certain that he would. There was a certain air of carelessness, even of indifference about him. She must reach him. Oh God, stop him, hold him! What was there in front of him? What but the boulders on the beach below? It wasn't a great depth but it was enough to kill. A man had been killed. What was

there? What? . . . Oh God . . . A verse flashed into her mind, an echo out of church . . . "and underneath the Everlasting Arms——" . . . Were they there? Oh, but *need* he fall? Could she not save him?

She ran on . . . and now she thought she could hail him and speak.

"Ezra, don't move. You are on the cliff edge! Keep still! Absolutely still! Till I reach you!"

She thought he heard and understood. He was carefully measuring his position with his stick. But he was not moving. She came up, breathless, tragic—to see a shrug of his shoulder, a smile on his lips.

"Oh Ezra! I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"No need to think." He was speaking coolly. No, she was sure, not coldly. But there was a little frown. The merest echo of impatience. A sharp reaction caught her: she felt suddenly weak, emptied of purpose, defeated. Had she been a fool? Had she lowered herself in his eyes, made herself absurd by exaggeration of the peril? But that she could not believe. She could not blame her fears.

"You won't go to this point again?" She knew she begged.

"Well, no, if you say not," he answered, rather composedly. "It wore kind of you to be fearful for me," he added, as if to mollify. She took his arm hurriedly.

"Come. Let us sit down near here. If you want the sea."

"Reckon I do want the sea. I came here for the sea." His deliberate matter-of-fact-ness abashed her: what was his mood? Her heart still panted with anxiety: she steadied it with an effort.

"The sea put life into me. Just to smell it."

"Reckon it do the same for me. I think once, before this happen," he put a hand to his eyes, "I'd loike to go to sea."

"Funny that. *I* think before I come to your uncle, I'd loike to go for a stewardess." She laughed with an odd nervousness. She added: "I might go yet." She paused. She thought he would have derided this talk of a mock intention. But he said nothing.

He had followed her plea to sit down, flinging himself, without hesitation, upon the grass, and then, turning his scarred face seaward. She noticed again the deep lines and shuddered with a new pity. She put out a hand, patting his. She was recovering her poise, though she knew that when presently she should be alone, she would have questions for her heart that she could not easily answer.

"Tell me!" said Ezra. "What do a man see from here? The sea. Yes—but ships?"

"Not many. To the south there lie the Wood light, that they call the Wood Lightship! It make a wun'ful heap o' noise when the mist come.

A lot grumble over at Stowe there. But here we only git it when the wind blow this way. We can see a ship in the morning when a boat go to Flushing and when another that carry a train go to Belgium."

"A train?"

"A train ferry they call it. The ship pick up the train like a baby and put it ashore on the other side."

"And that all you think you see?"

"*Think* I see?" She paused. For an idea was suddenly forming in her mind. What did he know? What had he heard, of the things that you did not see with the physical eye but that were there to see with sight of another kind? She could not remember that she had told him. She found herself telling him now: "There are some wun'ful fanciful people about here—or wore. They used to tell that there wore a town under that sea and that you could hear the bells of the church."

She told the tale boldly, uncertain how he'd take it and fearful of again showing a romantic weakness that might be unwelcome. But the idea seemed to please the man. He laughed, but not as if he sneered.

"Fancy, that be! But it seem quite a noice fancy. D'yer know I hear some bit o' that before, and I just laugh. But you hear a lot when you loike what I am, and I reckon I could hear them bells if I listened *now*."

He spoke quietly, but eagerly she caught him up.

"Yes. I . . . heard them, one day, I think. You know they say that the bells you hear are wedding-bells." She looked up suddenly and more fearfully than she knew, to see how he took her words. She had an idea that he always knew when anyone looked at him. He certainly knew that she was looking.

What she saw was a change from the first sudden stiffening of the face muscles as she had spoken to a determined relaxation of them, until there was a smile about the lips.

"Wedding-bells?" he was saying. "Why not? They had funerals down there. So why not weddings?" He stopped. She looked at him again in acutest anxiety. What was his mind and thought now, what the tone in which he had spoken? . . . Was she to believe he'd merely been humouring a child's fancies? Since the first hour when he'd swept her off her feet by his whispered declaration, he had seemed to retreat within himself and to remain almost incommunicable.

"Poor Ezra. Do it make you feel a long way off things?"

"It feel loike going out in a boat on the sea in the dark by yourself. At first." The addition was made deliberately.

"Not by yourself—now?"

He smiled his odd, secret smile again. But his

answer was to stab her mood with a commonplace.

"It git late. Reckon I ought to be going back." He was already rising.

What was lost? Was anything? She got up at once, taking his arm. Of late she had no difficulty in evading close embraces. She liked to believe that her success was due to her own firmness. They went on silently. Why were they silent?

"Well, that wore a noice time," she said at last. "We could go again."

"Why of course we could, my dear."

She started with sudden pleasure. He used very few endearments, so that she welcomed every one passionately.

Passionately? Yes, why was the passion to-day all in her? He was kind and loving. But there was a sort of deadness.

Still, he'd called her "my dear."

Suddenly her first alarm revived: momentarily forgetting the character of his response to her warning cry, she said quickly: "You won't—you won't go again—*there*, without me?"

"Oh, I don't know. We could meet there."

"No, but it stand very high—that cliff."

"Nawthen to fear. I come to the wire fence. And then I count. I know what I got to count. Fifteen paces. That bring me near to the cliff. Then I git careful with my stick. Don't need a stick till I go fifteen paces."

"Who tell you fifteen?"

"My uncle tell me. He take me with him, once. He tell me that wore the best walk. And he say he pace it out from the fence. Fifteen, he say."

"Then you go careful, counting."

"Oh, aye."

They came to the hollow, and when she had led him into his room and received the kiss he always gave her—yes, she insisted in her heart, *always*—she retreated. The kiss was a little sedate, but at least it was a kiss.

And now her mind was sick, fearful. What were these moods that changed so quickly in her heart and his? Had he thought her very slightly ridiculous for her fears? Why was he not grateful or at least delighted that she cared so much that even the most unreal danger could fill her with alarm?

Why had he so suddenly turned home?

Was she in contact with the progressive experience of all lovers? Did one lover suddenly find a distaste for some minor manifestation of love by the other, and did such a distaste, for the time at least, infect the whole relation between the pair?

Had she shown her heart too much in that momentary alarm for him; had she, in doing so, "cheapened herself"? Did he very slightly despise her? Oh, if she had learnt earlier this mystery of love relations! Any girl in the village knew more than she!

II

Still restless late in the evening, she went up and out of the hollow, "for a breath." Presently she found that she was walking, hatless, in the direction she had taken earlier in the day. She had no conscious idea of going to the cliff top. But the atmosphere was, she found, charged with elements that seemed to create anew the distress she had felt earlier. The strange mutability of love was, though she could not have said so, hinted in the shadows that came and went on the face of the landscape as she walked. Her last experience of Ezra was too recent for it to depend, for its vitality in her mind, upon her memory: it was still with her, part of her present.

She came to the wire fence before she knew it. Stepping over, she now had a sudden idea that made her stand for a minute with a heel resting against the fence support. Then she took a stride and counted "one."

Diana went forward, counting as she went. She was still counting when she came to the cliff edge. Thirteen!

She stopped. She perfectly remembered the figure Ezra had given her. He had said fifteen. She had only taken thirteen strides, and she was a woman. A man would take not more than eleven. If he took twelve—certainly if he tried to take fifteen and took no care in the dark till he'd

reached that figure, he'd . . .

She shuddered. She turned back. Her face was very white. She felt as if she was seeing things of which before she had heard only faint and terrible rumours: she saw smoke curling up out of a pit.

She quickened her pace to be out of it all.

CHAPTER IV

It was long before Diana slept. But her mind was little disordered either by the discovery she had made or the suspicion she founded on it. She had an odd confidence in herself, in her complete efficiency to deal with any situation that arose wherein Ezra was not directly and personally involved. She feared no man—or only he. But she was perfectly clear as to one action that she must now take in respect of Ezra.

When she went to his cottage in the morning it was only of the shadow that had sprung up in their relationship that she thought: for, as to the other matter, she hadn't any doubt at all of the action she would take. But her immediate and tormenting question was: would Ezra be some new Ezra, an Ezra who a little disdained her?

She was immensely relieved when she found his manner was the earlier one of curiously tender awareness of her coming. Dare she believe that the shadow that had fallen yesterday had gone, like a darkness over the face of the sea when the cloud reflected there had wandered away? If she trembled she did not betray herself by speech. And she determined to be content that she had learnt one

of the subtler manifestations by which the relations between lovers are signified.

She could never really have a moment's ease. The situation must always be sweet and terrible. At any moment she must expect exposure, the ruin of her hopes, an exchange of lovely hours for the beginning of years of derision. For what would the village do but laugh, and not only laugh but make a story to pass from lip to lip and from generation to generation?

"That's her! Yon old hag! She think herself in love with a young man. And because he wore blind and couldn't see her thick neck, she think she can fool him! But one day it happen . . ."

It hadn't happened yet.

But her anxieties grew with every minute that she kept hold of her happiness.

"To-morrow," she used to say, "he'll be laughing at me with the rest!"

It was a pure miracle that, with all the coming and going, her lovely fraud remained unexposed.

II

But there was something to say now. She said it casually, indifferently and only after much had passed between them.

"Oh, I wore along by the cliff again. My pace don't be much. Not a man's. But I reach the cliff in twelve steps. So don't you walk more'n ten."

She paused.

"Reckon I say what'll make me seem not exactly. But—don't you go to that cliff again till I tell you. Promise!"

He looked as if he'd challenge her. But to her satisfaction he did not.

She now saw the wisdom she had shown in not confessing the anxiety of a lover. This time she had won.

"Oh aye!"

She knew what she intended: to delay a particular action until a particular moment. She decided that that short delay involved no special risk. Except in respect to the one matter of her direct relations with Ezra, Diana was always entirely clear as to what she would do and when. To experience hesitation was constitutionally impossible to her. Knowing this, she marvelled the more at the effect that Ezra and her attraction to him had wrought upon her character.

But she was still granite firm in her dealings with the world and crystal clear as to her intentions.

That matter of her discovery should wait. She knew precisely when she could open it. Till then . . .

Till then she gave herself up to the immediate matter of Ezra.

III

All the time Diana was considering means of binding him to her. Her natural shrewdness and her immense force of character in ordinary things were behind her plans now. She was feminine, a coward, a weakling in the one matter of concealment of her years. Yet from the outset she had the arch-boldness to scheme to create such a situation as, the truth being known to him, would still keep him close. She decided that she must be indispensable. Not that her hope was always strong that if he needed her he'd still love her. An occasional pessimism sometimes, indeed, took grotesque forms: he'd denounce her, he'd cry out to her to leave his presence. But in the meantime she must build a foundation of confidence from which he would not willingly depart. If she could once make him look to her for eyes, would he blind himself again by a firm and eternal separation?

From the beginning she had sought to know how his times of silence and loneliness were passed.

"You read, don't you?"

"Read? Not I! Huh. Don't be rafty! Reckon in the manner of speaking for blind men, I *can't* read."

"Reckon you got to learn."

But then she paused. She was remembering.

He'd been drawn to her by her voice. He depended now, for his knowledge of books and of the news, on her reading to him. All blind men were taught braille and he'd evidently a smattering of the method of touch. But he was inexpert, and was either, as she'd said, "lazy," or indifferent. She suspected that he'd passed through some tunnel of despair. If he was in dimly seen sunlight again, it was because her voice had drawn him there. Must she encourage him to read when, by so doing, she risked the magic effect of her voice? Let him refuse to read by touch and depend on her if he chose. Yes, let him depend on her till he'd come to look to her for everything.

"While I'm here you can look to me, I reckon. I'll read what you like."

"That suit me very well," he said.

She came close, folded his braille away. As she put it by in a drawer, she gazed down at it with gloomy suspicion. It stood for potential separation. It might serve to take him from her. Let it lie there where it was. Let *her* be his touch. She came and sat by him. "I'll read always. You'll want to hear the *East Anglian* now, won't you?"

She settled to it. A man had been hanged that morning in London.

"You can keep off that!" he said sharply.

She started. "I thought all men loike murders."

"When you're in the dark, it's dark enough, I reckon, without that. I don't think what the chap

do. I think what he go through. There's nawthen that a man do that's as bad as what a man go through. No——"

She started. She didn't like the situation. Their roles were in danger of being reversed. She'd settled that she was to teach him. He was trying to teach her. She must get back the initiative.

"Here's a bit about a man that steal a horse and——"

"That's better. I don't mind that. What I don't loike is for a young mawther to read murders——"

"Oh," suddenly her eyes shone—that was it? "You wore thinking of *me*?"

"Reckon, yes. No murders for girls. When yer old, you can read 'em—if yer loike! What about yer horse?"

Not knowing whether to be troubled or happy now, she plunged into the story:

"The man steal the horse and change his colour and sell him to the farmer that own him and that he steal him from."

He laughed. "Don't believe it."

"It's in the paper."

"Oh, well, if it's in the paper——" With the habitual respect of his kind for newsprint, he conceded the truth immediately on that reminder.

She read the story and followed this up with excerpts from the local Member's address to the Gippeswyk Conservatives.

"I don't know nawthen about politics."

"You ought to know. You *got* to know. If you live on a farm. . . . A farmer got to know which side his bread's buttered."

He laughed. "Now that dew be what I've said before. When you talk loike that, it seem loike as though you wore my mother, not my mawther. You talk like forty-five, not twenty, my dear, so you do."

"Suppose I *was* forty-five!" she said archly. She reflected that he couldn't see her face twisted in the agony of the immediate experience. He laughed again. "That dew be a good 'un! Yes, suppose you wore! No, my dear, none o' that! I don't want no old women round me. His mother's the only old woman that a man want, I reckon. I knew a bor when I could"—he swallowed—"when I could see what a mawther look loike, and he wore gone on a woman that must have been in her thirty-five and him twenty. And praper dazzy we think *him*! We didn't half laugh at him for running after a wore-out old girl."

He didn't see how her lips quivered as she persevered. "You got to learn to think about politics——"

"Reckon never could be bothered."

"Oh come!" she said sharply. "You got as much sense as the others. You're lazy, that's all."

"Never could learn."

"Never would, you mean."

She thought that he liked being chipped by

"this girl." Probably he wasn't in the mood to explain. Why make him expose the bitterness of the past? He'd made it clear that he had no inclination to show her the dark places of his heart. He laughed to-day. She understood—how terribly well she understood! He argued: Why expose one's despair to the young, confident, joyous mind of a young girl?

"You talk to me. You go on telling me. It mean everything to me to have a beautiful young mawther think me worth considering of. So you go on teaching me, my dear, and you go on reading to me. There wore a time—funny how I tell you —when I reckon I was through with everything. What could a man do that's blind? Finished, I said, done for."

"I wonder what you'd like to have read to you?"

"Beside the paper?"

"Yes. I got a few books. I could read a tale sometimes——"

"Don't matter to me what you read. What matter is that it's you that do the reading."

She smiled and nodded to herself. It seemed as if what he said was precisely true. It was her voice that had first drawn him, conquered him. She lived for him in her voice. Her voice signified her to him in a most extraordinary way. While she was at such pains—the veritable pains of an old maid, as she told herself in derision—to keep her person out of his too-easy reach lest something

was betrayed, the truth discovered and disaster involved, she was safe in her voice. She could not wholly evade him: her heart would not allow her: but her intimacy with this man, as real as it could be until another intimacy achieved itself in marriage (she now dared to play with that idea), was created and maintained by the voice that Heaven had given her.

"You'd loike me to read a book?"

"Yes. Go and look at your books and find something. I'll listen, never fear. I'll listen now." He paused and laughed. "Funny. Because, thinking I wore blind and finished, there wore a time when I'd not listen to any mortal man! No, I wouldn't."

Diana went away. That had been too long a talk. Suppose Tubb had been near. Suppose . . . she shuddered and knew why she shuddered. . . . Westerby. Unfriendly eyes could not have seen in that contact a mere passing kindness. Sooner or later they'd talk and Ezra would hear and all would end.

But another day was another day—another day of extraordinary, tremulous delight.

In the meantime she must find something to read to him.

IV

Diana came into her own small room and shut the door. It had been her room from the begin-

ning. Westerby had wanted her to use a larger bedroom that looked down upon the yard. But she'd told him bluntly, as he was to find always that her way was, that she must have a view.

"Reckon space matter more than view."

"Reckon view matter more than space, Mr. Westerby."

"Reckon you think you know a lot."

"Reckon I know that much, Mr. Westerby!"

"Take yer room."

"I wore going to, Mr. Westerby!"

She took it and set up the possessions out of her trunk. She still used a box and when she was told that modern maids never used trunks but always travelled with smart suitcases, she said she was glad to hear it since, not being a maid, but a housekeeper please, she could now go her own way.

The box yielded her sparse wardrobe. A second tweed coat, a skirt even more worn than the one that covered her when she arrived to take her place: gum boots: leather leggings—even a pair of breeches she'd worn as a land girl in the war. It was a masculine wardrobe.

To-day she was woefully conscious that it was manly. She recognised that it had had the grim and curious effect of hardening the "arteries" of her femininity: she was now trying desperately to correct its character.

The room was as it had always been since her

coming. There, over the little iron bedstead, was her mother's portrait, an enlargement in lamentably crude colours of a photograph. A cabinet-size photo of her father in a black frock-coat and nursing a tall hat like a baby, stood framed in silver, in the centre of the mantelpiece. She was only half conscious of the fact that the arrangement had followed the secret design of her heart. Her mother had the place of honour, but from bed she looked only at her father's face. She had liked to feel herself as firm and masculine as he.

She did an odd thing one night. She changed the pictures. It was her mother's gentle grace that she looked at now. Make me like him, had once been her prayer.

Make me like her, she cried to-night.

She turned to her looking-glass. At one time she'd scarcely given the thing a glance: she went to it when she suspected she'd got muck on her face after being in the cowhouse. She'd prided herself on the indifference to these things she'd learnt as an N.C.O. of the Land Army. She had liked the rumour that in the market they regarded her as half a man—to be feared and treated with the respect due to a hard, masculine bargainer—a woman who disdained feminine wiles and approaches or the consideration granted to her sex.

And now she hated all that manliness!

She looked back at her mother's picture. How

should she capture some part of that delicate femininity?

She brought a paper to bed. She turned to the advertisements:

> SKIN FOOD!
>
> Charing's Soap makes the hands white and smooth!
>
> Try it To-day!

Presently, with a sigh, she folded her paper. The whiteness of the hand didn't matter: the softness did. But more than either must she depend on her voice now that he'd said what he'd said.

She turned to her books. These included a Bible and a Cruden's *Concordance*. She took up the latter. She had before had the intention of opening it. She knew where she would open it: at the column headed "Blind." She wanted to see what the Bible said of the blind.

She read: "I will bring the blind by a way they knew not." What did God mean by that? Was she intervening to bring Ezra by a way that he knew not, but that could not be God's way?

"Who is blind as he that is perfect?" That could not be spoken as a thrust at her lover: but there were men with sight at whom the words could be flung. "And knowest not thou that thou art blind?" . . . Ezra—or *herself*? Was she not persist-

ing blindly in an adventure as wicked as it was desperate? She turned to St. Luke, to the story of the blind beggar. Christ defended the blind: would He yet defend Ezra—against herself?

Hurriedly she put down the Bible and the *Concordance*. Quickly she took up another volume: one that, in the past, she had handled less often than she had used some of the others.

V

The "library" was always a feature of the room —the few books of her puritan father. Her mother hadn't been a reader, though a few book presents of hers were on the shelf. The Bible, Cruden, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, Taylor's *Holy Living*, Nuttall's Dictionary, *Dairy Farm Management* (1898) in three volumes, represented her father: *East Lynne*, the *Works* (they were always the "Works") *of Harrison Ainsworth*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Rosary* stood for her mother.

She cherished her father's books: because he had read these books, she read them. She brought to the reading a masculine determination that enabled her presently to have a familiar knowledge of every volume on her shelves. For she turned often to her fiction. Like many cottage readers to-day she would have said that Ainsworth was her favourite author. Modern fiction they don't read: Dickens they read, and they like him at his most dramatic

or his most sentimental. Little Nell is, for them, still authentic tragedy. But they don't like the vigour of his comedy: they don't like his satire—even when it is exerted on behalf of their own class. Whereas Ainsworth meets all their requirements. He deals with great events, provides lumps of colour and incident, his action is stately and his outlook as early-Victorian as theirs.

Diana read these books with an occasional volume from the County Library. She forgot much that she read and, except for the books on her shelves, she troubled little about authors' names. But these volumes of her own she knew familiarly. She was careful not to allow herself to turn only to the lighter fare, and grimly controlled her reading from day to day, as she regulated her other activities. To the Bible and to *Farm Management* she turned, naturally enough. The *Pilgrim's Progress* she could read with enjoyment. *Holy Living* and Cruden and the dictionary were for regular and determined study.

She knew that, left to herself, she would not have bought any books at all. She owned to-day as many books as and no more than her parents had owned. But she had an idea that the preservation of their books—her father's particularly—was a tribute to them, while to read the volumes was to give her parents pleasure. Her father had been a laborious reader himself. But he *had* read. She would read. She dealt with her books upon a sys-

tem. The Bible she read every day: the novels when she found time: *Farm Management* whenever anything arose requiring the assistance of that enlightening work: a chapter or two of *Pilgrim's Progress* once a week, generally on Sunday: *Holy Living* very occasionally. But, oddly enough, it was to the last book that, to-night, hastily deserting her *Concordance*, she turned, as more than once of late she had found herself turning.

VI

Not knowing in the least what to read to Ezra, she had found that he objected to nothing except crime in the papers. He still shivered when, forgetting, she'd read out a headline.

"I don't like to think of a mawther like you reading things loike that. You too young——"

She would shudder and drop the paper.

She brought him *The Tower of London*. He listened silently and seemed to approve.

The next day she brought something else.

"I wore looking at my books," she said, "and I find something for you. You wore telling me that when first you think you wore blind you say to yourself that's the end. You think wrong ideas. Well, listen! This was in a book I got that belong to my father—by a man they call Jeremy Taylor."

She presented her divine with the authority of the mature. She thought Ezra was amused at the

firmness and readiness to be didactic, of the "young girl." What neither knew was that a beautiful voice was being lent new power by the quality of beautiful words.

The passage had impressed her by what seemed to her an almost mysterious appositeness. And in the way of her class and with her perfectly direct mind, she didn't hesitate to read. And he heard. She knew she could rely on the common sense of a man of her own order to welcome a reading of this kind when it was appropriate. When a woman of more delicate upbringing might have doubted and halted before reading, Diana read. She knew that he wanted to hear her voice in any case. They were country lovers, so speech didn't come easily. When they spoke their love was made by tone rather than by volumes of words or by touch. English country lovers don't talk. They don't even depend on vision. They sit silent, staring into the vague. You never see in England the absorbed, excited faces of lovers such as you see in Italy and France.

But Diana had the shrewdness to realise that she had a natural instrument of feeling in her voice and that she was never more in authority than when she had Ezra listening to her.

And so she read, not only fluently but commandingly, knowing that she made love to him, though the words bore no relation to herself.

" 'But'," she read, " 'these arts of looking forwards and backwards are more than enough to

support the spirit of a Christian: there is no man but hath blessings enough in present possession to outweigh the evils of a great affliction. Tell the joints of thy body, and do not accuse the universal Providence for a lame leg, or the want of a finger, when all the rest is perfect, and you have a noble soul, a particle of divinity, the image of God himself; and by the want of a finger you may the better know how to estimate the remaining parts, and to account for every degree of the surviving blessings. Aristippus——' " The reader paused. " Don't know who *he* was," she said vindictively.

" 'Him, anyway in a great suit at law, lost a farm, and to a gentleman, who in civility pitied and deplored his loss, he answered, "I have two farms left still, and that is more than I have lost, and more than you have by one." ' " Diana paused again, "I don't know how your uncle would answer that. But it's *right*." She returned to the book, reading on as if conscious of what lay in front and coming to this: " 'Or, I am fallen into the hands of publicans and sequestrators, and they have taken all from me. . . . What now? They have left me sun and moon, fire and water—a loving wife—' " She blushed. She knew the words were there and she had meant to read them but—she knew she waited for a comment that did not come. It would have been so easy. . . .

Yet she was certain he'd noticed. She plunged in again: " 'and many friends to pity me, and

some to relieve me, and I can still discourse; and unless I list, they have not taken away my merry countenance, and my cheerful spirit, and a good conscience: they still have left me the providence of God, and all the promises of the gospel, and my religion, and my hopes of heaven, and my charity to them too; and still I sleep and digest, I eat and drink, I read and meditate; I can walk in my neighbour's pleasant fields, and,' " suddenly she stopped. She was reading with the eye, though not the lip now, " 'and see the varieties of natural beauties, and——' " she came into speech again, " 'delight in all that in which God delights. . . .

" 'And he that hath so many causes of joy, and so great, is very much in love with sorrow and peevishness, who loses all these pleasures, and chooses to sit down upon his little handful of thorns.' "

The man listened with the utmost curiosity, apparently trying to explain something to himself.

"Reckon those words dew sound! Can't think how it happen! But they dew *sound*!"

Diana looked across. She had had the strange idea that as she read she was dealing in some sort of magic: but she did not in the least understand. She had marvelled at the appositeness of the passage. Naturally she did not know that he and she were sharing in a first lesson in the music of English prose. But she saw that she'd stirred him; and conscious, as never before, of the power of her

voice, she made the most of this chance. She was quick enough to see that he was not attracted by the sentiment alone, though it was that which had made her read the book, when he said "I reckon I could listen to you for ever reading out things like that."

"Oh, I'll read. You needn't trouble yourself to learn that touch-reading! . . . Not yet!"

She shuddered at her perception of the meaning of the words she had half involuntarily added. But she knew that she distrusted braille. Braille was something that made blind men independent. She didn't want him to be independent. He would then need her voice less. He might gather ideas enough to need her less. But her fear of that was only one of the terrors that were signified to her by the future.

The situation had for her a grotesque magnificence like that of a golden palace whose fabric was inlaid with flashing jewels but below whose foundations was dynamite with a fuse waiting for somebody's match. She saw Time as something that played with her, while making no sign and offering no disclosure of intention. Sooner or later . . . sooner or later . . . I shall be betrayed. But I shall not betray myself.

She remembered her calendar: "Gather ye rosebuds . . ."

What was important was the actual fact. With every derision spoken, with every denial

made that such a thing could happen, the thing *had* happened!

In the invented life of a woman in a book this thing could scarcely have a place, being exposed to every sort of peradventure. But by the only test that mattered here, in her life, it had being and went on having it. She was old and a man went on being in love with her, believing her to be a young woman. And still nobody knew there was anything to betray. The thing might last a minute or a year. In the meantime it was an experience so exquisite, so choking in its sweetness, that it remained a living and lovely wonder, a miracle that re-created her and made her what she was not, a girl.

But a new thought began to mingle with her delight. New? It was no new thought—since it had had its shadowed existence in her heart since the first moment. If she cared for this man at all she must not, for ever, deceive him.

With this conviction present, she came face to face with a fact so fantastic and overwhelming in its absurdity that it subdued both her imagination and her mere inventiveness. Her natural vigour collapsed. Why must this thing be? Why could she not enjoy for ever what she had enjoyed, with so precarious a hold, for the past weeks? What was this immutable law of the race—and why immutable—that man never went with woman the number of whose years exceeded his

own though young women often loved and married old men? Why, when love had never come to her till now, must she have to surrender what was hers? At the obvious answer to her own question she would refuse to look. She would go on a principle for which she had no name, though many another simple soul could have told her that it was a little truth of biology on which the persistence of the race depended.

She could not console herself with the thought that she had only to keep silent to continue the position indefinitely. It was a miracle that it had lasted so long.

But she had not touched on the fact that really controlled the situation. She had profited by a simple and natural error on the part of the man, profited by vulgar and absurd contrivances, as well as delicate evasions. For she knew that her first hesitation to let him draw her into his arms for such embraces as she believed were part of the relations between young lovers, had been the gesture of an instinctive self-defence. Oh, that the day should come when, having confessed the truth, she could go to his arms knowing him her own! But first she must teach him to love her so that he could not do without her: in his helplessness he must put out a hand for her arm: her eyes must be his eyes.

Then at last he would be hers in all ways.

Their love would be completed by . . . marriage. She knew, though she still scarcely dared to put it

thus, that marriage was in fact her ultimate aim. She wanted to be loved—yes. But for a woman whom romance had coldly ignored during more than half her life-time, marriage represented victory. Even when in love Diana found that her masculine temper and quick sense of material values saw in marriage a concrete achievement. Not that she sought now marriage with *any* man. She could tell herself proudly she had never done that: it must be Ezra whom she married.

But she must marry Ezra.

And yet before she married him she must tell him.

Before victory, surrender.

And after surrender—defeat?

VII

She knew that she must surrender what she had won. Yet she still delayed surrender from day to day. For a woman of her social condition she had a curiously profound acquaintance with the habits of the mind. She knew that, once she had surrendered, she would look back and remind herself that the first day after self-exposure, a day in which the field of golden experience would look black and dead, need not have come for another twenty-four hours—during which interval she could have enjoyed another whole day of feverish and stolen happiness. This practice of self-projection into the

future, and from a less immediate future to the one just in front, had become a habit with her. She was always now ascending into some potential experience based upon an earlier and lower one, and then falling back upon the first. To and fro went her troubled mind, in the delirium of a delight to which she had no smallest title. She was no better than the swindler who lives in luxury on the result of a robbery, knowing not from one minute to the next when he must exchange the splendour and homage he enjoys for shame and hard tack. Yet, as never in the whole long expanse of her life, she was triumphantly happy! For not till now had she begun to live. But she was living now in alternating conditions of delirium and staid, controlled delight. What she was enjoying was not a counterfeit. The man had been drawn to her. He had created a picture of her in his mind. She did not know how blind men sought the women they married, but their methods and impulses must approximate to those of men with eyes. She'd heard of girls who wrote letters to themselves in order to contrive a pseudo-amorous excitement for their chill and lonely hearts. But this was not a contrivance. It was, for as long as it lasted, genuine. If, when he knew the truth, he still loved . . .

She stopped. She had always assumed there could only be one result. She had not believed merely that she risked all by revelation, but that she lost all. But now came the hope: suppose he

could no longer turn from her? Suppose their two souls were now too closely intermingled ever to part? In the first hour of her discovery of his interest in her she had decided to delay confession, in the hope that some such intermingling might happen: but soon after she had told herself that there was no chance that the frail bond would survive the truth. But now she turned again to her first thought. Suppose the bond, being no longer frail, should survive? True, everything was against the possibility. But suppose the possibility in spite of everything, became the fact!

And now she began zealously to examine the thesis that everything was against her chance. Reasons began to emerge for hope. A man with such a handicap as Ezra's wanted first of all an aid —not a young, soft plaything for his passions. He needed and asked kindness, care, guidance, sympathy. These things she could give.

He clung to her hands. She trembled at the thought of that clinging, suddenly and violently reflecting the idea, intended for consolation, that he clung because he wanted help. How much sweeter to believe that he clung because he wanted any kind of physical contact with her.

. . . But presently, back upon the first line of argument, she told herself that there was every sign that he depended upon her so completely that she must be for him an ever-increasing aid. He must hold to her even when he knew everything.

She quivered on the brink of confession now.

Yet she did not confess. She thought that when at last she spoke it would be following some sudden impulse. In the meantime she was as she had been from the beginning. She trembled when anyone approached. For to be seen with him for a few moments only might be enough to draw a comment: and any comment was perilous.

She had, by now, a step. She knew he recognised it. Until this affair she had not been aware of having a step at all. She had clumped about, thrust through a doorway, sending her voice ahead to prepare others for some demand or other, some order. But in the last weeks she had grown feminine, even in this matter of moving. She consciously practised delicacy. She watched other women—Mrs. Ashplant particularly, the Squire's wife, and watched her anxiously, hungrily, even to observing the precise set of her foot. Afterwards, half consciously, she'd had a practice. Walked in at a door, gone back, done the thing again more delicately. How odd to be doing these things! How sweet and terrifying and absurd!

It was now that she had a new and disturbing experience. She had risen one morning and, standing in her pyjamas, stretched herself at the window, took deep breaths and finally turned to look herself over, slowly, self-consciously. She knew she had never eyed herself thus in other days. She looked down at her feet with a trembling curiosity.

Who was she? The woman she believed? Who inhabited her? The woman who once had held a command in the Land Army with a masculine indifference to talk of love, or a sentimentalist with the heart of a school-girl?

Still thus thinking, she dressed hurriedly and was presently in the living-room below into which the morning light poured with the sweetness and freshness of something newly created. She stood for a moment with her question still present in her mind—who was she? It was now that her eye fell on the calendar hanging beside the grate and proclaiming, in black figures, the date of yesterday. She looked at it with a flash of old suspicion: she had shared with her master an uneasy feeling that it was an object to be avoided. Poetry! Poetry was a thing that contaminated the clearness of your thinking. The particular work under her eye had got into the house by false pretence, posing as a calendar. Yet she knew that she sometimes let herself read the legend. Not always—for so often the words were not her words: on the other hand when she understood them they so often disturbed her.

But nothing disturbed her as did the words she read when she plucked yesterday's date away and let herself read the new legend:

> For who is sure he hath a Soule, unlesse
> It see, and judge, and follow worthinesse,
> And by Deedes praise it? hee who doth not this,
> May lodge an In-mate soule, but 'tis not his.

She stared, she read again, she stood as if challenged.

Questions began to pour up into her mind. What of her soul—her soul at this moment? Did her deeds praise it? Was she lodging an inmate soul that was not hers? Did that, indeed, explain her quickness in deceit?

Ah, but was it not true rather that a soul that had not been her own fled when first Ezra had spoken, and that her true soul was now present as young and lovely as he conceived it? Was it possible to believe that this man, who'd written these words, *knew*; and that she was lodging a soul different from the one that had delighted in the over-robust and masculine, and that had scorned women's ways? Was not this her own soul and that other a usurper?

But the man—a person unknown to her named Donne—said that a soul was yours when it followed worthiness and when your deeds praised it!

The soul within her lied, deceived, sought only her own happiness. . . .

Her own? It could not be hers! Could not! It was the soul of some wretched girl hunting a man!

CHAPTER V

THERE was a letter on Westerby's desk. Or there had been. And Diana knew its contents. The writer was Mr. Ashplant, their landlord. When letters of that sort came from a man who, as she felt, controlled her future as much as Westerby's now that so much of the responsibility had passed into her hands, it was time to think. Perhaps it was time to do more. Only . . . one had to choose a time.

It had been in her mind that she must see Ashplant. She, not Westerby. Once called on to perform that duty, she would have taken it as a matter of routine, urgent though it might be. To-day she'd found herself hesitating. She knew why she hesitated. . . . Until now she had legislated for one man, an old man.

Now there were two men. Yes, two, since one was the other's nephew.

If she let all go . . .

But in the last forty-eight hours the situation had changed. Until then it had been simple enough. There was money owing: somebody must talk Ashplant over, get him to wait a bit longer. Tell him there wasn't any money—at present. More—tell him there wouldn't be any more in

the future, whatever hints had been given that there might be! That last thought about hints brought her new problem before her abruptly, reminding her that she had deliberately waited until this hour before action.

Action not, first, against Ashplant but . . . Westerby!

She knew what she must do, what she must say.

Diana was remembering now a man standing on a cliff edge.

II

She braced herself. She did not often find that she needed to do that when facing her master. But to-day was different. Perhaps *she* was different.

She found him in the room in which he spent his time at home. It was a big room and had once been a kitchen. It had thick red beams in the ceiling and a flitch hung from the middle oak like an emblem of the trade that had vanished. As an emblem he regarded it.

"Now that you got that modden kitchen 's yer call 'm, with the stove that think he cook every mortal thing, I reckon this room got to be the parlour. But see it keep loike a kitchen."

Into the little modern room with the gas stove she'd had put in against all his arguments, had been banished all signs of cooking—crockery, pots and pans, and so on. Only the big brass

kettle and the bed-warmer and the giant bellows with the brass fittings, and the plated tray remained, and these by way of decoration. To these Westerby had a noticeable attachment. Once, when Diana had one of her very rare colds, and was in bed for a day or two, the brass in the "old kitchen," as Westerby called it, began to have a tarnished air. Westerby was moved: he was angry. The first Diana heard was that the woman who came in to do a day's work once a week had gone off in the middle of the morning with the greatest dignity and without even troubling herself to wait for her money, because Westerby had told her she was a botty slut!

"And a slut she wore!"

"Who do the work till I'm about again?—ask Mr. Westerby that," was the message sent down from the sick-room.

Westerby sat always in a high oak chair with its back to the light. He professed to despise all cushions, saddle bags and ease. He was a man to be suspected of always finding a certain satisfaction in discomfort. He sat so that he could see the faces of those who addressed him, while keeping himself in shadow, and so that he could survey the large open grate with its glittering brass, polished metal-work and great black pot that hung over the grate when there wasn't a fire, and that could be swung aside when there was.

Diana had not knocked, and as she came in she saw him turn without rising and quickly replace papers in the desk at his right hand. She looked at him haughtily. To-day she had the utmost contempt for his manœuvre to keep the faces of those who addressed him in the light while keeping the shadows for himself. The tremor of hesitation had left her. She had none of the nervousness with which she still faced the need of pleading with the landlord to keep Westerby in his farm. She even rejoiced in the strange atmosphere, as if something acrid floated in it: she might be stepping on a deck cleared for action. She smiled grimly. And then she cleared her throat.

"That demand there," she nodded towards the desk, "come from Mr. Ashplant?"

"Aye, it come!"

"He want to be paid?"

"Oh aye, he want that!"

"D'yer remember saying to me that there might be something some time."

"Oh aye."

He spoke with the indifference with which to-day he received everything that was said to him: as a younger man his cunning had taught him to ingratiate himself with the more powerful. He didn't pretend anything to-day but an indifference that he hoped was marked by his air of cold, clammy unconcern.

Diana was cool too.

"Yes! Well, I don't think nawthen o' all that, when *you* say it! I think the man talk as he always talk and with nawthen partic'ler to offer. Now it's his old picture that he say fetch a lot if put up." She gave a nod at the floor overhead where, as she knew, a canvas of which Westerby had often boasted, hung. "And now it's some shares that he buy! And mostly it's nawthen. But I fare to know a bit more now. I happen on something, Mr. Westerby." Her mouth had grown very grim. "And I reckon I know that you *weren't* just talking that last time."

"Oh aye?" For the moment the face of this man of declining wits took on a complacent air as though he received a tribute and as if she had said: I realise that when you promise something there is something to promise.

But, a moment later, a shadow of suspicion came slowly over the narrow, lined brow and into the heavy moist eye.

"Yes, Mr. Westerby, I know. I know a liddle and I guess a lot. I think of some few things that I remember. I think of a question I hear you ask. I think of a paper all stamped and thick that I see in your hand, and I very nearly think of a time when I see you looking at something in a shed. But I suppose you woren't sure enough of your own cleverness to try that. Still," with mock tolerance, "if you'd been a cleverer man you'd

have done different. You'd not leave him to earn you the insurance money by breaking his neck on yon cliff!"

Westerby started, half rose, sat down and then began very slowly to lift himself up again. The whole looked like a performance of reflex action. There was scarcely an idea in his face.

"You say *that*—to *me*!"

"I say that to you. And I'll say it again if you loike! Yes. You think yourself very clever, Mr. Westerby, but let me tell *yew*, since nobody fare to tell you before, that you're a praper fool! You think you kill a man like that. You skeered of other ways, I reckon!" This with the utmost contempt. "But you think *your* trick'll do what you want. Oh, I know! I can't *prove* nawthen. And you haven't, so far as I've been able to see, tried other tricks—yet. Not that I'm in the least skeered of you now! You won't be trying any more tricks, and I'll tell you why! I got my eye on you. Oh, you think you can git rid of me or him! But I don't reckon you will. If you try that game, I'll fare to have the law on you *now*. But I know you. You're just a silly old tittermatorter; up one minute with an idea and down the next. You can't do nawthen. You're too old and too silly. And you're not even dangerous now I've got yer!"

She looked at him, throwing over him a high flood-tide of contempt, so that he visibly fell back. He was abashed, cowed; his cunning left his face

as water evaporates on sand, leaving merely a surface without significance.

"I—I *moight* git you away. I moight . . ." he began, at last struggling for utterance.

"No, you won't! I'm not going!" And it would have been perfectly clear to the world, if it had looked in, that she was not. "I stop. If I didn't stop you'd be for it. I stop to save him—and you, Mr. Westerby!"

"Who ask to be—to be——"

"Nobody ask. But I reckon I stop all right! And there's just this to say before I finish, Mr. Westerby. No more games like this. No trying tricks with him—trying to hurt. I haven't caught you yet trying poison——"

He started. He stood up again and sat down. It had been a thrust. But she thought she knew. That clouded mind had thought about other methods without having knowledge or resolution to try them.

She'd got him now though, in her fingers.

"I see! You did think of it. But perhaps you thought as well, 'I'd be a prime fool if I tried that!' And so you would. If you try *anything* now but giving that young man a home and keep, I'll see what happen to you. It'll look praper black if you send him away now, won't it? Loike as if you only keep him to kill—like a calf!" She finished in a sneer.

"And I got to keep him, eh?"

"Reckon you have. Or I'll see something happen!"

"Will you now, will you?"

He was feebly attempting rebellion. The blue veins swelled in the rusty skin of his forehead. "You will, will you?"

"Yes I will. Now you git that safe in your head. No games. No tricks—and things go on as they've gone. And he go safe. I'll see to that——"

"What do he be to *yew*?" There was a flash of an old cunning in the half-sneer. But she was on him with overwhelming fury so that he pushed himself back in his chair, though she hadn't moved a foot.

"What's any man to me that be unlucky enough to have an uncle that try murder?" If Westerby had a suspicion, punish him for having it. "What's that uncle to me? I serve him and slave for him for fifteen year and then catch him out trying to break the neck of a young man that belong to him and that ought to be able to look to him—though he don't have eyes to look with! You ask me that again and I'll show *yew*, Mr. Westerby!"

"Well then"—he spoke in very subdued tones now—"reckon you've finished, eh?"

"Oh, not by no means, Mr. Westerby. I know what you fare to keep in that black box that you got locked in yon desk." She pointed to the shabby little inlaid escritoire that he'd once bought cheap at the selling up of a bankrupt fellow-farmer whom

he'd hated and of whose downfall the desk would be an enduring reminder: he'd said then that "it would just do for my papers."

"You open your desk. See?" She paused, pointing. "This minute! see?"

"Well?" He'd begun to obey. But now he paused as if a half-impulse to resist had come again.

"It isn't *well*! It's ill—bad, that's what it is! Open that desk!"

This time the command was obeyed, if sulkily. "Now open that black box! Oh, I can see it."

She could. It was a small deed-box. The key was even then in it, pointing to the fact that he'd closed the desk at her approach.

"Open that box, I say."

"Suppose I don't choose?"

"Oh, you'll choose all right. That's the evidence that hang you if you git hanged, Mr. Westerby."

His swollen freckled hand with the stained fingers with their broken nails moved as if moved by the power of her eye towards the deed-box and, probably before he knew it, he had lifted the top.

"Now. Take it out!"

He looked round slowly, with a last flash of the old low cunning, pretending not to understand.

"It?"

"*Yew* know! Don't you pretend you don't.

That thing with all the red stamps. Very valuable. Ain't it?"

She stood sneering, with folded arms.

He had begun as before to obey: paused as if again meditating rebellion. Yielded again to her authority.

"Yes, that's it. Take it out. Put it on the grate. The grate's empty. But here dew be a match," she held a box out, "and here's a bit of candle fat that help wun'ful!" She turned quickly, snatched at the mantelpiece and brought down a half-burnt candle.

"The thing burn in a minute."

"You don't mean . . . I ain't going to do *that*!"

It seemed as if resistance would rise strongly at last. But she beat it down grimly, contemptuously.

"Oh yes, you are! You git it done, Mr. Westerby. Now, please. Or—— I'd hate to have a lot of police crawling all over the house looking into drawers and things."

Once again he surrendered. He picked the paper out, and under the furious and terrible drive of her glance fell back towards the black grate. Then, dropping the document into the grate, he turned. He hadn't yielded totally yet. But she looked at him easily and commandingly now: he was just a snarling old fool to be dismissed. She wasn't sure whether the destruction of such a document really ended the insurance

policy, but she hoped, and saw that he believed, that it did. He was therefore no longer dangerous, and he'd give no more trouble once he'd done what she intended him to do. But he must do that.

"Come!"

She did not stamp her foot. But a jerk of her arm seemed to give his labouring wits a signal to obey.

He struck a match. He put it to the paper.

"There's that candle fat!"

Obediently now, he dropped it upon the paper. There was smoke and then flame.

He turned away.

"I reckon you're satisfied now?"

"Reckon I am."

She took a step into the middle of the room.

The old man had crept away from the grate. He seemed to be waiting for her to go.

"Now there's just this to say. I reckon, Mr. Westerby, I've saved you from a crime that a lot swing for!"

He quivered under her contemptuous fury rather than the threat of the vengeance of the law.

"Now, mark. Everything go on as it wore! I *stop*! You've been thinking you'd git rid o' me. But you won't! You *can't*! If I wore to go, he'd put you out of the farm and sell you up to-morrow. So I stop. And—and"— only now for a moment did her voice quiver—"that young man

stop. He stop and you keep him—for the time, anyways. It fare to be right down wicked to send him off and him coming here believing you give him a home." The insincerity of which she was conscious didn't check her eloquence at this point: and if she knew that she wanted to keep Ezra here solely in her own desperate interest she did not say so even to herself.

Some might tell her it would be safer for Ezra to go. But she resolutely reassured herself: as long as she was here too, Ezra was safe from every clumsy device of that silly old villain.

"One more thing, Mr. Westerby. I stop and he stop. But I stop to see there aren't any more tricks. You got nawthen now to gain by hurtin' him!" She glanced significantly at the grate. "He got to live here. See—*live*!"

"Oh, aye. I see."

He turned away. He walked slowly, as if stricken, towards his desk.

He sat down heavily with his back to her. In other circumstances the gesture could have been pathetic.

"Well, that settle that! Now I'm going to see Mr. Ashplant."

He made no answer. She thought he was relieved to find she would still go.

CHAPTER VI

When Diana reached her room she stood by the window looking out, but her mind saw only the room downstairs from which she'd just emerged. She'd done something vigorous and something that none other could have done.

She knew why she'd done it. If she'd done it primarily to save Ezra, she'd not thought only of Ezra. She'd done it to save the framework of her love. Even now some might tell her that she risked Ezra's life by letting him stay: that she risked her own self-respect in continuing in Westerby's service. But the relations between herself and her lover were so unfairly, so grotesquely conditioned by the circumstance that made such relations possible at all. If she were to go away, or Ezra, it might easily mean life separation! For where, but in this strange and lonely place, was the pretence that she maintained to be kept up for five minutes? Her happiness, her strange, breathless, unnatural happiness, depended for its life on no change. There must be no change! There must not even be the change that a landlord could command who had to complain that he received no rent.

She must see Ashplant.

II

Diana set off cheerfully enough. She could fight anybody. Hadn't she just been tested—even if it had only been by means of an old fool whose slow, malignant cunning was easily capable of defeat. Ashplant was an unknown quantity. He'd lately succeeded his uncle. In other days Westerby had always gone up to the agent's office when there was business to arrange. It wasn't a properly equipped office but there had been office hours. You could see old Mr. Ashplant himself at fixed times. You could, as Westerby said, "Git at him."

The new man didn't choose to be "got at." He'd closed the office as part of a general process of what he called "tight-nin' things up." He had the egotism of the new arrival of his type—the man who sees a need for his presence, an urgency to reorganise in accordance with his own conceptions, and a contempt for all methods of the past. And so he had decided that he didn't need the office and that, turned into a cottage, the place could bring in rent.

"If I'd got an agent I might need an office. I'm my own agent and they can come up to the house."

But he'd another motive than merely to get an extra rent: or so Westerby had complained.

"He think if he say come up to the house, a man feel frit. Skeered. Think I don't fare to know

when. And I don't loike anyhow."

There was probably some truth in that way of putting it. Exchanging guarded confidences with such other tenants as he'd talk to at all—Westerby never offered much, so got little—he had found them all reporting the same thing.

"I don't loike going up to the house," one man had reported. "I go once and his man say 'He's out, don't know when he'll be in.' I call agin and this time he come out in a praper runty way with a 'What yer want' at me in the hall. I could talk in the liddle old office to his nunkle. I wore holly stammed in the big swell place, all pickshers and guns and tigers' skins and a heap o' things. And what I think's this, Westerby, he *mane* yer to lose yer head. So next time I write, and I git a civil enough letter. He want to keep us to letters. So he write a civil letter and give you a wun'ful uncivil word if you go up to see him."

Westerby grunted. *He'd* tried to see his landlord and with much the same result, though he didn't choose to say so. But, as Diana noticed, when next there was trouble, Westerby did not go up—he tried to write, and when he'd struggled with letter-writing for some time, he'd brought the letter to her and told her to finish it.

"Cut my hand."

She could see no cut: but she knew he never admitted he couldn't do a thing.

She wrote the letter and the answer was civil

enough. But that was in the early days of the present crisis. "I am prepared to wait for settlement till Lady Day."

Westerby threw the letter at her as though he spat it.

"Shucks for him! Reckon he can go on waiting."

"He won't wait for ever—he don't be that kind!" she told her employer.

Westerby swiped at his greasy beard.

"Won't he? Suppose he have to?"

"He's not like his uncle. He's a rale hard man. He know exactly what he mean to do. He do it when the time come."

The need for her present errand proved that her warning had been true. The time had come. Indeed it was a little past if her suspicion was true. Westerby, in the manner of weak men, only told her of a bad position when it was desperate.

"He think he turn me off now. He think as I don't pay him, he got me. It what he *want*! What he's been trying for, hoping for."

She'd pointed out that he'd wanted his money and that was all there was to it, but that he'd not wait any longer.

Yes, he'd not wait any longer. Unless *she* could persuade him. Yet what reason could she put forward? She knew little about the man. But she knew that she was less ready for the task to-day than she'd have been a month earlier. If he'd

turned them all out then, she could have managed. She had her savings. Moreover her reputation was good enough in Gippeswyk market to get her another job: and if Westerby were to find himself where better men had gone, he'd brought it on himself.

But to-day? Very well did she know that the situation to-day had changed radically. She could not let them be turned out. If they were turned out, not only would Westerby be on the road, broke, but his nephew would be banished. It didn't concern her just now to speculate as to where he'd go. He'd go where this gossamer romance of hers couldn't last a minute. In no other place would the extraordinary situation which had brought them together be possible. This hand-to-mouth love affair of hers would be ended in the hour when Ezra groped his way to the station: she must save the position by keeping his uncle, Westerby, in the farm.

And all the time she was sick with fear. She knew that, in ordinary times, she'd not have felt easy coming up this drive and being seen from the house long before she reached the door.

She had the awe, common to her class, of all vast domestic architecture. She feared anything that suggested enlargement of a unit that had its part in her life—whether the unit was enough bricks to build a cottage, enough furniture to fill a poor man's house, enough land to make a cottage

garden or allotment. She didn't mind a big office building such as she saw in Gippeswyk, or the great Town Hall, for these things did not reduce ultimately to something within her grasp: their dimensions were outside her experience.

But a house with grounds and at the end of a drive, a house furnished with wealth and elegance, troubled, if it did not subdue her. It was the house much more than its master that she feared. Yet she knew that she could not have been so "skeered" as to want to turn back if she'd been making this call a month earlier.

To-day she was conscious that she was not going merely to fight Mr. Ashplant: she was going to fight her fear lest a lack of tact, firmness or mental agility should result in defeat. He wouldn't help her: that she knew.

She came up the last fold in the avenue of trees guarding the drive from the house. She was now exposed to every unfriendly eye, and it seemed to her that there were a hundred windows all filled with eyes. She hurried across, came to the door, glanced at the polished brass before pressing the bell uneasily: it was as if she saw reflected in its brightness the hard eye of a Society that contemned her and her kind. Her mood was such that she was astonished to have a nod of recognition and welcome from Mr. Wilkins, the butler. She'd always known Mr. Wilkins. A silent man, they said, who'd done well for himself in a very quiet

way; but always most correct. He had to be with that new master of his.

"You want to see Mr. Ashplant?"

He considered. His orders were to discourage. But Miss Cliss must be different. He'd heard rumours of Westerby—of course. He made it his business to know many things. But—yes, Miss Cliss must be different. He couldn't think that Miss Cliss would come without a very strong reason. Perhaps Westerby'd cut his neck? On the strength of that alluring possibility, Mr. Wilkins prepared himself to risk his master's displeasure.

"Will you come in? This way, please. If you come to the—the study, I'll see if he can see you."

He didn't say "Shall I give him a message?"

It was Miss Cliss. You didn't ask Miss Cliss questions, he believed. He'd heard much of the woman, and all he had heard testified to her being both respectable and highly "independent"—a word that has a very special significance in the class to which Mr. Wilkins belonged and in which he included Miss Cliss.

Opening a door on the main hall, he indicated to Diana that here she should await his master. He then closed the door on her and left her in a room she'd never seen before.

The room interested her. It was the sort of room in which lived people who had money to spend. Vast wealth to throw away on a heap o' nonsense! She

was nervous: she gave only a half attention. The other half was occupied with the thought that she must persuade the man she was to meet. But she saw enough of the room to be puzzled and curious. The little she knew of Ashplant did not prepare her for a room that created such an effect. The furniture was old. She didn't stand for ordinary old furniture. But this oak with the curtains, in which a purple seemed to disappear into a pink—to emerge on the further side of the weave: the simple, grey-and-purple pot with roses that made melody with the pink in the woven silk, the single water-colour landscape in which the scene seemed to ascend, though what was shown was a more or less flat field. . . . Yes, a mind of some special character must have designed this effect. Had she misunderstood Mr. Ashplant? Or was this the shadow of a woman—Mrs. Ashplant?

She got up and began walking the room. She knew she was nervous and that her movement betrayed the fact—if only to herself. But she was assembling her forces, as well as she could, to withstand Ashplant. She knew enough of him to expect a refusal to listen to her plea.

She was still pacing when she stopped, listening. Somebody was fumbling with the door. And then a boy with a black shock of hair, a heavy eye and round pasty cheeks looked at her with a stare that seemed as if its projector had just waked from a heavy sleep.

"Good mornin'," she said. She knew who the boy was. She'd an idea that he was dull.

"I thought you were somebody else," he said bluntly, in a thick tone that should have belonged to a man.

"You thought that?" said Diana. "Sorry."

"Not *your* fault. There's a dead man—I mean a dead cat—in the garden."

"I reckon you come to tell your mother. It give you a start."

"It didn't give me a start! I was glad it was there! I just pretended it was a man that somebody'd murdered."

Diana, uneasily conscious that the man she'd come to see might walk in at any moment, was amused all the same by this consciously heroic youth.

"What are you doin' about it?"

"I'm going to get him."

"Who?"

"The murderer. I came here really to get a clue."

"I hope you got one. I hope the clue hide in this room and you find him."

"Oh, I've *got* a clue."

He sidled to the door. He was gone before she could ask another question.

The boy did not shut the door properly, so that she could hear him crossing the hall, as it seemed, stealthily. Suddenly there was an exclamation, as

of a person irritated by what he saw.

"If you are going out, Valentine, go out as if you were sane, not as if you were a lunatic."

There did not appear to be any answer. But Diana wasn't really listening now: she was bracing herself for the next moment, when she knew she must explain her call.

A heavy step sounded now in the hall, the door was pushed and a man stood there. He was of medium height with a small head, sandy hair with the strands laboriously "fixed" to conceal sad wastes of baldness, blue "pop" eyes, a red skin and a deliberately hardened mouth—as of a man who studied to be firm. He wore a collar and shirt of the same shade as the blue reefer suit, so that his dress struck a single and slightly aggressive note. The plump figure bulged out of the dark-blue clothes as though they had been put upon him just before he had been subjected to the process of being filled up with water till the garments binding him could contain no more person!

His manner was what Diana, knowing what a man looked like who came to talk business, recognised for the treacherously genial. He did not offer to shake hands, but nodded amiably and waved her to a chair, as if by so doing he began to get rid of her.

"I come from Mr. Westerby."

He started. He'd expected an apologetic attitude, and a toneless, halting speech from that plain

exterior. Who was this woman with so melodious a voice? He felt at once a drop in his own self-confidence. Nothing more quickly reduces us to a sense of inferiority than to feel that our voice can make no show against that of the person we address. Our sense of vocal inequality seems to loosen our confidence in our mind and physical aspect. We speak worse than we would normally, we are thin of utterance and halting—even if we try to make up by frowns and a bunching of the muscles round the mouth.

Ashplant felt that the woman had already captured the initiative: and purely by the quality of her voice. It gave her a mysterious moral authority. He didn't at all like her opening. She was, he felt, almost enjoying the situation as she repeated, "Yes, sir. I come from Mr. Westerby . . . leaseways I come. He got notice. He don't know what to do. We none of us——"

"We? You're Miss Cliss. You're at his place? Who else is included in the 'we'?"

"Nobody. Not really." She flushed, and knew she did, as she added suddenly, "One other live in the place—a nephew."

"Oh yes? Well"—he cleared his throat as if enough time had been spent on the civilities: perhaps he was afraid—"and you've got some proposition?"

"No, I haven't. I just wonder if you could let us —let Mr. Westerby stop?"

"Why should I do that? He got the place at a low rent on a repairing lease. First he didn't do the repairs, and then he didn't pay his rent. You're rather asking me to give him the place."

"He'll—he'll pay. Pay something!"

"But he said that before. I understand that in my uncle's last year or two, when he wasn't inclined to bother himself, Westerby kept up this game of vague promises and dodging payment."

"He's had a hard struggle."

She marvelled at the pathos of her plea—at the back of the plea itself on behalf of a man she'd just threatened with prosecution. But she knew for whom she pleaded.

"We needn't pretend. The man has let things go. And I've been told why."

Diana nodded. She never saw any point in wrapping things up. Suddenly she took a resolution. For she'd seen something she could do.

"If he pay something—say forty pound—you'd take away the notice?"

Ashplant eyed her suddenly and sharply. He didn't feel completely at ease. He feared that this woman was in some way, and suddenly, enlarging her authority. He'd take away the notice. . . . Not, *would* he take it away. He was being cajoled. He didn't like the feeling.

"It's not a great deal." Why was he temporising?—*why*? Instead of refusing firmly. He'd no kindness for these people. That woman was look-

ing at him out of her steady eye: and yes, talking to him with a voice of extraordinary beauty. Nothing to look at. . . . But you couldn't help *hearing*. "I say," trying to raise his voice, "I say it's not a great deal by way of part payment for a debt of a hundred that's been owing for a year. But—well—if—if he pays that at once——"

"I'll bring it. I'll get him to pay it to-morrow."

Had he agreed? He tried to redeem his consent with a qualification. "I consent, of course provided that when the next quarter's rent is due——"

"Of course!"

She agreed quickly, snapped him up. And she knew she meant "of course." In three months anything could have happened. What was important was to keep things as they were—and Ezra as he was—for three months. Ezra! If he but knew how she fought to hold him.

"I'll say good day, sir," she said, complaisant at once. He cleared his throat. Perhaps he'd not been vanquished, perhaps he could still . . .

But he found he couldn't. She was stepping away.

In the drive Diana smiled anxiously to herself. She had had no hope and yet she'd won. A temporary victory? That did well enough. There must be payment though, at once.

But, free from the drive, she went slowly. She found that just as the sea reanimated her, the country that she saw now eased her mind. It

always seemed to her so completely free from the intrusions of the world.

She was hearing the secret of the healing power of the pastoral landscape. What gave this place its value was its timelessness. The grander scenes were timeless? The Lakes and the mountains? Yes, but the splendour of these places had been of the kind to overwhelm the minds of their human visitors: the vision of these scenes followed a man when he was back in the streets and so linked lake and street that when next he went to the lake the street came too. Those scenes were the colour of romantic poetry; but Diana did not know them. What she knew was her own landscape. And in Suffolk the background is as undramatic as it is ageless. If the Lakes, without being as spectacularly romantic as the Trossachs, could come suddenly into the news of poetry and of the imagination, their romance was noble and profound. But it was significant; it stood out. The eye of the spirit could not avoid it nor fail to identify it with a period in the history of man. Whereas the mental atmosphere of this Suffolk world was something so old that its origins were beyond your telling. Men discovered mountains in the nineteenth century as they had discovered gardens in the seventeenth. But the business of reaping and sowing before a background of oak and ash and elm was so simple and so obvious and so much a part of man's life, that nobody had thought it worth

while to discover it. True, men had written of the delights of the country life since the days of Latin poets. But had anybody seen that this East Anglian landscape, so quiet if also so sleepless in its vitality, had the serene independence of time and still more of place?

But all Diana knew was that this scene as she saw it had power to restore peace to her heart and to calm her spirit. She had now her plan quite clearly fixed. In a flash the idea had come, while still in the presence of Ashplant, that, out of her own savings, she could save a situation that involved Westerby least of all—but herself, the farm and—Ezra! Her money should buy three months more of Ezra!

Diana paused in her walk. She was now on the crest of the hill and could look back. She liked this view-point as much as any: it gave her such width of view. Her eye traversed the scene, field by field, back from the river to where she stood. Then, half turning, she took in the south-west picture. She felt alight with a new intensity of enjoyment of the visible world, and she knew when she had first been conscious of it. Love seemed to be mysteriously involved with the landscape. When this new, disturbing joy filled her, it used everything about her to interpret itself to her heart. Dubiously she had read the words on her calendar as they had met her eye one morning:

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud.
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that sight.

She rejoiced in what she saw before she knew that she did so. Her happiness was like a bird under a hedge. It sang before she saw it.

She looked about her to-day rejoicing in a scene particularly dear now that she knew that she loved Nature at all.

Here there were more trees, and at the end of the eye's journey, rising plough and meadow with a heavy line of oak guarding the ridge. The retreating eye took in an extraordinary variety in the values of the green. The far-off trees were green because she knew they were green rather than because she saw that they were. It was really a darkness that crowned the highest places. But the banks below were blue-green and the meadow in the middle distance had a sparkling green that lighted the whole picture, so that, whichever way you looked afterwards, you came back to the glittering centre. The meadow looked liquid as the river basin did not—for the water was motionless while the meadow grass swayed in the gentlest air that ever touched it. It was here that she discovered two human forms—the one a figure that, in the midst of so much that transcended human conceptions of scene and atmosphere, had the

pathos that goes with anything that is slight or minor, wounded or inevitably ineffective. The other was a shadow—like a woman's.

Diana looked about her again. Certainly the picture presented was, to her awakened vision, perfect. It was a landscape splendidly inclusive. It seemed to have, within its scope, all the characteristics of a true English scene when captured by the eye at a moment when detail and prevailing atmosphere unite in perfect proportion. And yet what was really enchanting in the picture was the continuous changes in all these colour values, so that even the bright green of the meadow grass had an exquisite inconstancy of tone. A mere shadow of white cloud, if only momentarily spun across the sun—and the green became sage instead of golden green. The shadow gone, the meadow was burning with green fire, while even the heavy colour of the ridge became half-aerial.

But the figure remained for a moment more without significance, as if Light itself was determined so to suspend its processes as to keep her happiness aerial too. The scene continued green, untroubled. The wayfarer, or wayfarers, had not, so far, been allowed to interfere with the objectivity of the landscape.

But now, suddenly, it seemed to her as if something was changing, and with this thought there came a sharp momentary fear. The scene was growing subjective, a new note of excitement was

invading the stillness. She looked quickly round her, but her eye came back at once to the advancing wayfarers.

For there were two.

Ezra and a woman.

For Diana the sudden experience was remarkable. For it had its phases that extraordinarily contrasted.

A woman! Diana found herself surprised by an overwhelming sickness of spirit, anger—yes, she knew—this was jealousy.

Then perceiving who the woman was, there came a wave of relief. The woman was Mrs. Ashplant. But suppose it had been another woman?

It is when we most completely experience a landscape that we are conscious of disturbing elements not alone in the present but in the future. Nature so intensifies perception that we see in the minor circumstance a miniature of something remote and major.

She slipped home by another path.

III

She soon heard of Ezra's meeting with Mrs. Ashplant. Perhaps she sought to hear. She went in and spoke carelessly. Oh, so he'd met the wife of their landlord?

He began to tell her the tale.

The encounter had been an experience for Ezra. The talk between them had been first by way of introduction one to the other.

"You get over the ground very well."

Except that a woman spoke he did not know who addressed him.

"Yes, madam. Reckon I find my way. Once I'm shown the short cut. My uncle live down here."

"Your uncle? Mr. Westerby. Then I know who you are."

Ezra's face must then have hardened. He still didn't know who spoke, but whoever she was, she seemed to understand and even to sympathise with his difficulties.

"I'm Mrs. Ashplant. I live here, you know."

"Then I reckon I hear of *you*!"

"I've been here a long time. But I don't seem to remember you."

"You wouldn't, madam. My uncle live at his'n for a long time—donkeys' 'ears he say. I just come."

"From——?"

"From London. But I belong about here. I'm a natural-born countryman."

"I expect you agree there's more to see in the country." There was a sudden halt—presumably as she remembered. He gave her a light ironic smile, as if amused. But his answer was not slow in coming.

"Yes. You see more in the country—even when you can't see at all. There's a bit o' space!"

"You can feel space?"

"When it's there, yes. The wind come different. It got a bit o' room. A man soon know. I always reckon it take a blind man to see the wind. *You* can't see it, madam!"

"No. I expect there're other things I can't see! . . . Oh, are you a braille reader?"

"No!" He assured Diana afterwards that he frowned hard.

"Because if you were I would arrange for you to get books and things!"

"Yes. But I'm not. Good day, madam."

Telling the tale now to Diana, he lifted his head.

"I told her straight. She know I don't want any books."

"You don't think you'd like to learn?" said Diana tentatively.

"Not I!"

He knew the answer she wanted, she told herself. Was it the answer he'd have given to others than herself?

She had long decided that, with Ezra, reticence was an art. But in some ways that helped. He was perfectly willing to co-operate with her in maintaining their secret.

"Don't worry, my dear. I don't open my mouth easy. Learnt to keep it shut."

His lips had dropped at the corners as if he

laughed silently at some image or memory. She thought that a time might come when she might find his habit of silence irksome. But for the time being she was content, and when he chose to praise her he did so generously enough.

"I don't say a lot. No. But I don't forgit I'm a lucky bor to have a young girl love me—me that a lot wouldn't look at. I ain't easy to talk to. But I reckon I try."

"Of course you try. And a man like you that try, fare to succeed," she said.

It seemed wonderful to her that even allowing for the deception, there was a man in the world who, while keeping himself so remote from the rest of human kind, softened at her coming. She was aware that the few in the village who knew of this man regarded him oddly. Some of them, she thought, feared him, young as he was.

"He look as if he got a tongue for all him saying nawthen."

But to her he was truly kind. She made the little qualification represented by the choice of that phrase: he was truly kind where once he had been exuberant in his bestowal of words. But she thought she understood: there was certainty now, where once there had merely been excitement—assurance that their love was established. It was a miracle that it should be so. But she found it the more explicable when her oddly regarded calendar was found to contain these words:

I have heard of reasons manifold
Why love must needs be blind,
But this the best of all I hold—
His eyes are in his mind.

Whoever Coleridge was, he must have understood her love story.

She was almost prepared to suppress the gravest of her suspicions of this poetry when the poet could so well explain the attitude of Ezra, whose eyes truly were in his mind.

CHAPTER VII

Diana was conscious all the time of the threat of invasion. Every sense was a scout nervously trembling on the edge of some possible ambush: every moment of consciousness was darkened by threats of discovery.

And it was all so absurd—with a gigantic absurdity. The whole universe must be laughing at her, the universe in which young, happy lovers traced the pattern of their loves. Yet she'd persevere. She'd stand up to the firmament itself. It should be no cup to engulf her—yet!

Yet! How she lived in the minutes and the hours! She was like one who looks at a magnetic bearing and discovers time mingled with space as he reads minutes and seconds! Minutes! The whole bearing of her life might be in terms of seconds—since in the next moment a wayfarer might step to the door, look in, understand, laugh and—expose!

She was desperately watchful now. But she never failed herself. One day she had been in to "do for" Ezra. They had talked a little, he had sought and held her hand. And then she had stepped to the door.

But opening it, she did so, not slowly and with

a long look back into the room, but in a flash, and with a glance into the yard.

At once she knew she'd done what she meant to do.

She looked back now at Ezra, and called softly, "Goodbye, till next time." She had scarcely ever employed an endearment, except in the speech of her silent mind. She had tried to say "darling," but the word seemed to hang in the air, somehow refusing to go over to him and make itself one with him.

At the moment her mind was on something else. She walked quickly away from Ezra's cottage. All tenderness had vanished from her face. Her eyes were grim, her mouth was set.

She knew where she was going and whom she would find. She didn't run but she walked fast. She wasn't sure that the other was aware of pursuit.

She came up with Tom Tubb in the yard proper, just before he could have escaped into Westerby's kitchen garden.

"Tom!"

He stopped. He had learnt to obey that voice of command when it addressed him.

"Oi?" If he knew he had been pursued, he didn't own it. She looked at him up and down, grimly, mercilessly. She knew she was enjoying the situation now she was in it. She'd wanted this situation for some time.

"When I want you by Mr. Dearbourn's cottage or when Mr. Dearbourn want you, you'll be sent for. And when you're sent for you'll come double quick! Got that, Tom?"

"Oi. I got that, I reckon!" He tried a sheepish grin but somehow it faded from his face under the terrible glance of the woman. He would have liked to be impertinent. He cogitated words he could use. But she was continuing: "When you're *not* wanted at Mr. Dearbourn's cottage you keep away. Got that?"

"Oh oi! I got that," he acknowledged.

He was trying to understand the situation. The effect of Diana's words was to make it seem as if she might often desire him at the cottage and as if that was her first thought. He had already begun to wonder whether he'd find himself in trouble, not because he was lurking at that door, but because he wasn't lurking there to be ready if called for: he was even wondering if the thing he thought he'd discovered was a pure illusion. And so the order not to come unless sent for had the effect of a command that it would be dangerous to disobey, without seeming an order issued in fear of his intrusion. But Diana hadn't finished with him yet.

"You gitting a bit above yourself. I been watching you. I'll watch you a heap more. You'll not do anything now but what I'll be watching. You'll not even pinch a chick."

She saw him start. But an angry flush rising in

the almost death-like chalk of the face was more confession than protest.

"I never——"

"Now, I didn't come here to listen to lies, bor. I know what a bor do—what every man do on this farm. And when I see a bor go sneaking round the doors—and window—yes, window—I reckon he's up to no good. I watch him."

She saw Tom's spirit curl up. He was beaten. If he'd played spy, he'd not easily play spy again.

But she'd finish him up completely.

"It don't matter if you come to the cottage—when I'm there and when I call you. But if you go round there when I'm not there, spying and sneaking on Mr. Dearbourn, I'll know what to think and Mr. Westerby'll know what to think—that you're seeing what you can pinch from under the eyes of the blind."

"I—never!"

Innocence spoke then. For one thing there was nothing to pinch in that cottage: for another it hadn't occurred to Tom that there might be. Diana knew all this: but she also knew that her knowledge had no bearing on the immediate situation.

"Then if you want to seem as if you don't plan anything bad, you keep off places where your work don't lie. It don't lie at Mr. Dearbourn's! Well" —sharply and with a sudden expansion of herself, an overwhelming exertion of moral authority— "now I wonder if I've cured you. Because I tell

you now"—her eyes flamed with a fire before which he quailed abjectly—"I tell you now that if I so much as catch you within a hundred yards of Mr. Dearbourn's, I'll put you up to Mr. Westerby for what you are—a low-down, liddle runty sneak-thief!"

"I never . . . I never . . . I won't go there. Never wanted to go . . ."

She waved him away. She wouldn't withdraw herself. She knew she'd conquered—won another of the strange little victories by means of which she perpetuated by a day, perhaps by a week, her relation to Ezra.

She knew that while she'd not terrified Tom Tubb into non-interference, she had so confused him that now he wasn't sure that he'd not imagined the situation on which he'd spent his labouring curiosity.

She'd beaten, crushed, laid low, a spy. But a man merely. She had wondered what would happen when the enemy was a woman and a young woman. From the first moment of Ezra's speaking to her she had instinctively feared the appearance of such a foe.

The battle was to come—and to come now with one Doris Ranson for enemy.

Doris Ranson spelt danger, and danger of the worst kind. For here was a woman, a rival, a young woman. The very woman who, given a chance, must win.

Ranson was a small grocer in the village of Drowning Marsh. His son had married and gone away. His daughter had had a place in a tea shop in Gippeswyk. But now her mother was dead and she must come home. Diana had known her as a little girl—and, as she remembered with a twist of her bitter irony, she had even liked her—petted her as a baby—she, Diana, being in her twenty-five. She'd liked the growing girl too, wished her luck on her departure to her "place."

But she conferred no benedictions now. She saw Doris, the pretty golden-headed Doris, as the worst of dangers. Doris must have had "boys." She must have known young men who came in for coffee to the café in Gippeswyk. But it didn't seem as if Doris admitted any such conquests. She said very frankly she'd disliked the job and only took it because her father's shop wasn't doing very well. She was glad to be home.

"I'm a country girl. Glad to be at mine once more."

She came to Ezra's the first time because the errand boy who usually came up had fallen from a bicycle which, like most bicycles supplied to errand-boys, was two sizes too big. But she came again in a couple of days. It was then that Diana's swift-moving mind fastened on what she felt was the truth. The girl had noticed Ezra. Why should she want to see Ezra? What was the fascination that a blind man could exert, supposing he had exerted it?

She knew she was developing an abnormal apprehension. Was it likely to grow into something that deceived her? Would it, in short, end by blinding *her*?

But facts were facts. The girl came and the girl came again. Searching her face Diana could read commiseration. But she was sure she read no interest—the interest of a woman in a man.

And the worst of it was that there was no repelling her. One could hint, but as soon as the hint became broad and large enough to excite attention, the attention was likely to be extended to the person giving the hint.

Diana was in the doorway of Ezra's cottage when this girl appeared once more. Doris came as if she expected a welcome, but as if she need not concern herself to consider whether Diana joined in it. But what most angered Diana was the girl's easy toleration of her own presence. While her junior and rival was filling her heart all the time with the worst jealousy, it was the crown of bitterness to feel that Doris had no jealousy of her. There were times when Doris even welcomed her presence.

"You come in, Miss Cliss, and talk to this man. He make me tired," she'd say with a laugh. She turned her large languorous eyes on Diana, smiling lazily. In Diana, the hopelessly middle-aged, there was complete safety! Let Ezra talk to Diana—leave Ezra with Diana. She'd keep

him safe. Whereas if one of those other mawthers from the village got at him, there wasn't any knowing what would happen: so Diana read her thoughts; and Diana knew she must submit. There must not be even a moment's assertion of herself. At all costs she must hide from Doris, as from the rest of the world, the idea that she was interested in Ezra. Give the girl a thought of that and even if she had no malice she'd explode into a laugh—soil everything by a word. There lay the hideous weakness of the situation. The lightest laugh might blow this all to pieces—the most delicate and exquisite romance in the world. It depended for its life on the persistence of a single romantic error. It was in the hands of any man or woman to destroy it. And a person of the dullest perception could make discovery if given the minutest chance. Was ever a gossamer web of beauty more intolerably dependent on the retirement of the careless, impending touch? But hitherto she had only to fear those who, even if they made discovery, might not be provided with a stronger motive than mischief to expose her. Whereas now perception of the truth could only have one effect. If Doris knew, she would not be content merely to laugh—she wouldn't laugh at all unless she used laughter as a weapon to destroy. If Doris knew, she'd kill at once—kill romance, kill the little dim vision in the heart of Ezra, kill —yes—kill her, Diana—for though her limbs

might still move, and her brain still exercise itself in the service of the farm, she'd be dead. Her heart would be a mere dead weight within her breast, beating but without the triumph over the world of material things that the heart of the happy man and woman intensely signifies with every beat. All must depend now upon the continued success of a deception so flimsy that the lightest touch might destroy it. Deception—yes! She dared not hide from herself that she went on deceiving from moment to moment lest by any chance she should provide for herself a moment more of happiness. Deception—without question, for if he knew, would he consider her for another moment? Would he not rather at once embrace the offer of a younger woman's beauty?

But given that she meant to keep him for another hour, or another day, if she could, her course was simple enough. She must never be heard talking to him: but if by mischance she was, she must teach him his words.

She tried to teach him now.

"Ezra, you'll never forgit what I tell you. If you sit agin me and say things—that a woman loike—you don't say them if there happen another in the room. . . ."

"Oh, reckon I don't ever do that since you warn me."

She looked at him, studying his face with the anxious curiosity she always bestowed on it.

"You think you won't. But you got to be careful. You really got to be. I reckon I don't know what would happen to me if you spoke out."

He misunderstood as he was intended to do.

"My uncle 'ud send you off? Reckon *he'd* not moind."

"He'd not loike it. He think a woman come to work."

"Let him think it then!"

"But you won't never show you love me, if someone should happen along."

"All roight! And I reckon a blind man know when anybody come within a moile. You don't see, I tell you—you *know*."

"But Ezra, darling"—she still managed her endearments with almost painful embarrassment—"I'm not *only* thinking of your uncle. There dew be others. A woman come here sometimes. She talk. I've heard her. That girl that bring the things from Ranson's. Doris she call herself."

Ezra laughed. She thought he was feeling happy. She would have liked him to show his happiness at some other moment. But he told her that he laughed at her, at her excess of modesty in forbidding him to reveal a word of their attachment. Why need she be so sensitive, though, of course, it wasn't wonderful that she was. No girl would be proud of being loved by a helpless blind man who'd not even the romantic touch of wealth. He laughed again.

"I don't blame you not wanting to talk. No mawther 'ud be proud of a blind man——"

It didn't occur to her at the time that his speech was curiously even, as if he appreciated a situation rather than intensely experienced it. But she caught him up at once:

"Not proud? I *am* proud!"

Her voice, her lovely voice, was suddenly filled with passion so astonishing that he involuntarily turned his head in her direction.

"Then when do you reckon you'll speak?"

"When . . . when we're married." She tried desperately to lighten the answer, but the words came through darkly and tragically so that he still seemed to be hovering over her words as if trying to discover something.

"When we're married? . . . That *moight* come!"

"You . . . you think that. Oh, Ezra, my love. . . . You think that?"

He murmured something. It might be "yes."

His face now was dark with a sudden reminder. She could read a new agitation in his mind: was he remembering that he was helpless and dependent on his uncle?

"I know what you're thinking!" she cried.

"My uncle moight do something." He spoke calmly but not as if he believed what he said.

"Do you think that?"

There wasn't much conviction in either voice

now. But he came gallantly forward with a firmer optimism.

"I don't know. Reckon he have only me. He moight think it a good idea to tie you up, my dear, so you'd be tied to mine if—if you take me."

"Oh, Ezra—dear Ezra——" She stopped. From far away came the sound of a light step. "If somebody come, you'll remember you call me Miss Cliss very stiff loike. Not a word till I tell you that you can."

"Roight. Though still it seem strange. . . ."

The light step was coming close. In a moment more Doris, golden-headed, and full of idle graces, stood smiling and assured in the doorway, a basket on one long white arm. Diana, every sense alive, in one glance saw everything: that the girl was perfectly, indeed exasperatingly assured, that she didn't mind the presence of the woman she saw before her, provided the woman would wander off presently and not spoil a girl's chance with a man, and that the basket she carried was very small.

"I'm sorry, Miss Cliss, not to bring the whole order. My father send the other things with the boy. I brought the tea and the sugar because I thought you might want them."

Diana frowned. She understood quite well: she thought too that the girl knew she understood. There had been no need to bring the tea so early.

It could have waited to be brought by the boy. But the little basket gave an excuse to come up here and visit the young man. And she was clever enough not to have brought in the basket anything that could be called a gift for the blind.

But while her heart was crying out, "Why need you come here—you with your beauty—why do you trouble yourself with a helpless blind man —why couldn't you leave him to me? I, who have nobody and can have nobody else?"—her lips were saying, "It was kind of you. You shouldn't trouble. Not at all necessary. We never need the tea till the afternoon. Besides which we don't order just when we're short. The canister hold enough for a week before what you bring come. So don't you ever trouble again, Miss Ranson."

She thought the girl looked at her. In the country a girl expects a middle-aged woman to call her by her Christian name, but is quite pleased to be addressed otherwise, when the new form of speech is recognition that she has become a "young lady."

"Oh, it's no trouble, it's a pleasure. I'd always be pleased to bring up your orders, Miss Cliss, if the boy's on something else. You see, since I come I've been telling father that he want to keep the shop a lot cleaner. So the boy have to set to. He clean the window this morning. So I come up with the tea."

"Then I better not keep you, Miss Ranson.

Your father'll be wanting you back," with a too elaborate laugh, "to see that that boy do his work praper! A boy always show himself a wun'ful heap o' mischief if he's left!"

"Oh, the bor's all right. You'll let me sit down a minute, Miss Cliss?"

She hadn't waited for permission. She was sitting at ease, her dainty feet in the high-heeled walking shoes that offended Diana at sight, delicately lifted against the lowest rung of the chair opposite to the one on which she sat. An unpardonable ease of manner, a gross impertinence! If she must sit, she could at least sit stiffly, as Diana always sat when in other people's houses.

"Oh, Mr. Dearbourn"—with a new and surpassing effrontery she turned upon the young man, conscious of her possession of the sword of youth—that weapon that so easily and lightly brushes aside the opposition of elders—but not, so far, conscious of the knowledge that would have been a weapon far more terrible.

"—Oh, Mr. Dearbourn how are you getting on?"

Ezra roused himself cheerfully. "Not so bad."

"That's right!"

It occurred to Diana, with a sudden throb of delight, that the young man's response wasn't as immediate as the girl had expected. After all, whatever Doris had of beauty, her voice had not the quality of her "rival." Doris didn't know that

in Ezra's mind she was competing—if competing at all—with another girl, whose personality, as deduced from her speech, was all-powerful and lovely. She was a little puzzled. She looked round the room for an explanation, but her eye coming to Diana, it forsook her again at once. Diana flushed angrily: she understood. Whatever explanation there could be for the young man's failure to respond, *she* couldn't provide it. Old enough to be his mother! Doris came closer. He should catch a savour of her scented sweetness. (And Diana was remembering, "You do seem that sweet, my dear." He seemed to be searching for his words. "Loike honeysuckle and roses! A lot of scents a man don't loike! But *your* scent now —that fetch me . . . make a dazzy fule o' me if yer give it to me too much.")

Diana watched grimly. The girl had moved her seat so close that his hand could touch her if her nearness could so stir him. She evidently thought she was ready now for anything and only waited for the elder woman to do the tactful thing. With her powerful imagination Diana could often inhabit the minds of others. She could move among Doris's thoughts. Doubtless the girl was arguing that it would be considered by Ezra's friends a pleasant change from the day's dull round to be visited by a beautiful young female: and if the same female was willing to entertain him she should be encouraged. But as the sort

of entertainment with which a young woman provides a young man is best bestowed when they are alone together, the intelligent—and grateful—elder will now go away.

Diana did not go away: and so far, Ezra showed none of the impatience which Doris expected him to show.

"I was remembering what you say about the new bye-pass outside Gippeswyk—you wondered if it was fourteen feet across, because if it was, it was the widest road in England. You say that, didn't you?"

"Did I?" Ezra smiled. He plainly didn't remember but he was flattered that his words had been remembered.

"You said that, I remember. So when I was on that road yesterday I think of it and I git father to stop and I measured it out with my feet." She laughed, looked triumphantly at the little, pretty feet—"They're not perhaps the full size of feet you measure with, but I allowed for that."

"I expect you'd have to allow a good deal," said Ezra gallantly. Diana frowned: but decided that it was mere gallantry: he was being forced by that hussy to say it. Well, let him! She wasn't going to move. And as for the girl's feet—take the shoes off and the stockings and you'd see cramped toes, ugly, covered with corns — the price ignorant young women paid for displaying small feet. She thought complacently of her own firm wide

feet, without a disfigurement of any kind.

But Doris was not getting on. Diana could see that much. Ezra seemed to be thanking her for her efforts to measure the road but he was doing so perfunctorily.

"It's koind o' you. You shouldn't have troubled. A road seem just a road nowadays. Still—glad it's the widest there is!"

"Well, I must be going!" (since that wretched woman won't get out of the room and give young people a chance to get together, paraphrased Diana in her mind, grimly). "I'll come another morning when you've *nobody* to talk to. I expect it's very dull then for you, poor Mr. Dearbourn!"

Ezra laughed. "Oh, not too bad. Reckon I git along!" It delighted Diana that, as it seemed to her, his smile was set in her direction. "Good morning to you, Miss Ranson, and thank you for looking in. Always pleased to see you!"

Doris was already in the doorway. Defeat? Yes, but merely at the hands of an ancient fool who couldn't see a post when it was in front of her eyes. "Really," again paraphrased the powerful imagination of the elder woman—"really the woman's more blind than the man! What she must want is to get neighbours in to amuse this wretched young man who can do so little for himself. And yet when a girl comes what help does she get? But the girl isn't beaten! No girl would be beaten by mere blind stupidity. A girl only sur-

renders to the other girl—the lover who wins at long last."

Yes, Diana was very grim. But she was smiling now, if a little slowly and coldly.

"Good morning, Miss Ranson——"

"No orders for to-morrow, Miss Cliss? Father say he's just got in some new tinned fruits. He want you to try a tin——"

"Oh no, thank you. You see we'd not have any use for tinned stuff at ours when it take us all our time to eat what we git off our trees."

"It's well to be you."

"Sometimes, I dare say it is. Sometimes it isn't." Why had she said those last words? Diana didn't know herself. But she'd choked the girl off. Not but what there was more to be done. Diana came back into the room, being now alone with her man.

"Well, *she* go!"

"Yes. She seem to want to stop. I hope I woren't short with her——"

"Reckon you woren't short at all! She the kind that push! Sars o' me what a tongue she have——"

"She didn't say a wun'ful lot!"

"She didn't git a chance! We didn't exactly press her to stop. She go. She go *because* we don't press her to stop."

"She seem a pleasant enough mawther."

Diana's face flamed. She could see its blaze of colour as her eyes caught the mirror. She was sud-

denly and, as she felt, absurdly agitated and angry. But Ezra couldn't see and she must not make a sign that should reach him. He wasn't disgusted by the minx as he ought to have been. She must make him. She could easily make the girl ridiculous, paint her in absurd colours.

"She come in and push."

And then, without precisely knowing why, Diana stopped. The words wouldn't come. It would be so easy to destroy—or it had seemed so. He hadn't seen the girl. Her voice was flat by one's own. And he was ready to laugh. Yes, a few words cleverly put together, as an angry mind could put them—and any small impression that was favourable to Doris Ranson would be wiped out!

A few words! Indeed how quickly they had framed themselves in her mind. "She seem as if *she*'d not wait to see if she was wanted. She take for granted that people want to hear that voice that sound like rain on a tin roof." He'd laugh here, thinking how that fitted. "It wore a good thing you didn't let her come closer or she'd have choked you with that night-scented stock she cover her neck with—and that she call scents. And you should ha' seen her little feet that she talk about. There wore something that look praper loike a bunion that I could see from here——" He'd laugh hard at that. And all those depreciations could be called true—without resorting to inventions about her bad complexion and skinny figure. Oh yes, he'd laugh!

But Ezra wasn't given the chance to laugh, for Ezra wasn't permitted to hear any of these burning commentaries. The girl deserved them all, the flaming mind of Diana told herself. Why, then, could one not say them? Why did one stand like a fool, hovering over the loved head and speaking not at all?

There were things one didn't do—that one couldn't do? . . . Perhaps!

But there were other things one could do. One could change one's grocer! After all, there wasn't any need to buy tea from Ranson. There were only a few things that, if you were a farmer, you bought at a grocer's. You didn't buy butter or cheese or bacon: or if you did you only bought when you were short. And tea was a thing as easily bought in Gippeswyk.

But there was something else that one could do. Just now, however, there was the man to talk to: he seemed to be waiting.

"There's one thing," she said; "you were a good bor, Ezra, in not letting that girl know anything. I wore that skeered once you'd tell her to go away because you'd got me."

Perhaps, she thought, he wasn't sure that he'd have said that. Perhaps he didn't know on reflection that he altogether minded this girl coming and talking to him. She wasn't Diana, so he didn't care about her. She only came because she thought he deserved a bit o' pity! All these thoughts swept

through Diana's mind, as she waited for his next words.

"Oh, I'd not be too hard on her!" he said lightly. "She seem to loike to call. I don't reckon I want pity—which is what she bring, I'm thinkin'. But she sound young—not so young, maybe, as you are, my dear; but a young mawther with noice feelings. So I'd let her be."

"Aren't I letting her?" said Diana sharply.

"Oh, aye, you doing that. And as for not letting on about—about *us*—you can trust me, my dear. I ain't loikely to offend *you* when you all I got." He spoke quickly—her anxious mind asked herself if he spoke too quietly.

"Am I all?" The rich, golden voice had grown thrilling and tender. All the sharpness had gone. Diana was very close now. But she moved away quickly, remembering. He must never be allowed to come too close. . . . She'd a middle-aged virgin's modesty, she supposed! But it wasn't that. He must not know too much, deduce too much of the truth. A man with a quick apprehension, such as the blind possess, might guess. . . . Later, when she'd taught him to depend wholly on her, when he could so little do without her that he'd want to marry her whatever he knew, they could be lovers! . . . Lovers. She blushed again.

A heavy step and a boy was there—the grocer's boy. He hadn't been kept away from his errand-

duties very long. The tea *could* have waited!

But she must go away now. A voice was calling from outside. Mr. Westerby's. . . .

It was later when alone and at leisure that Diana remembered the other thing that she must consider doing. She had been puzzled from the moment of Doris's first appearance by the girl's interest in Ezra. A romantic yearning? A girlish delight in the presence of heroes? Possibly but not probably. A girl didn't set herself at a blind man, with the long and inescapable liability of service that living with him involved, unless there was some motive. True, women did strange things to get a man, and took any man they could get. She paused, with a frown: wasn't she, after all, describing her own impulse? But she pushed on. Very young women gave themselves a chance with the boys first. She'd known a woman who'd married an old wood-cutter aged eighty-one. And the woman was only forty. But she'd run after men for twenty-five of those forty years before she'd made this, her first, capture. A young girl of Doris's attraction could only be interested in Ezra because she believed he'd inherit his uncle's property and because she also believed that his uncle's property was worth inheriting. If she knew the truth . . .

But as she reflected, Diana began to question herself. How much did anybody know? What did

Westerby now intend by his nephew? She knew what he'd once intended—death! She knew why he'd given the young man shelter. He now professed to be kind from a sense of indebtedness to a man who'd been blinded in his country's service. But had he really repented and was he ready to atone for his own wickedness? Did he mean to leave Ezra all he owned—and a more important question, could the possible bequest amount to anything at all? She didn't believe it could. She could not see how there could be any money unless the old man had insured his own life, which wasn't likely. . . . But if she were able to convince Doris that Ezra would be a tragic liability, she'd be rid of the girl, and it was important to be rid of her—not merely or so much because she had engaged Ezra's interest, but because if she continued to pay her visits she was bound, sooner or later, to discover the truth. Exposure was bound to follow then and at once. Like a dandelion clock in the wind, romance would be blown away.

Doris must be discouraged. If Doris knew that all she'd have would be a blind man who was penniless and for whom she'd have to work long hours daily, sometimes doing things that were highly disagreeable, she'd quickly vanish. Ezra was good tidily to-day. But if ever he fell ill, somebody would have to do everything for him. In the first hour of her acquaintance with him she had found an odd maidenly (old-maidenly?) excite-

ment in acquainting herself with the details of the daily toilet of a man: she had turned over a safety razor, a torn shirt, a sock with the heel out. She had done all the repairs she could do.

But she had always envisaged a sickness befalling him when she must do things that perhaps only a wife could or would do. These services that would merely delight her might disgust another woman. Doris didn't see that it was such duties as these that must fall to the wife of Ezra, and that there would be none of the compensations of an inherited income. But before one could convey the truth to her one must know what the truth was: one must clear up Westerby's intentions.

Diana knew that he was afraid of her. He avoided her as much as he could: but she'd have no difficulty in questioning him. And when she had got the truth she'd pass it on to Doris, who, in her turn, would pass it on to the village, so that no other girls would come up hunting Westerby's "fortune." (She suspected that while drinking he had dropped hints of secret possessions of great value. "You don't know all I got.")

She'd be rid of the girls.

And so she, Diana, would keep her man for a little longer.

II

But when at night she thought of Doris, she turned sick with jealousy and fear. Convinced that

she could defeat the girl, she yet shook with apprehension. She had seen how easily a young woman could draw close to a man, even a blind man, knowing that her very form spoke to him, and trusting it to communicate the fact of its youth. How ready for contacts they were—the young! How unready herself!

This matter of contact was something that obsessed her. She was woefully conscious of the potential treachery of her physical outlines, of the betraying thickness of arm and thigh. She must, she told herself, recapture the feminine lines that once, long ago, she had deliberately abandoned. She knew that it wasn't merely a matter of flesh and muscle: it was much more one of the set of a body which to-day had nothing yielding or submissive in its texture. She had stood beside him, half willing to sink down at his side, yet powerfully restrained by the immense authority of past preoccupation. She feared betrayal by that means more than by the word of actual enemy or by confession. She who, so often, could act on firm and wise impulses, could only halt and own herself the victim of her own awkwardness. She found herself, what she'd always thought all labourer-lovers to be when she'd thought of them at all—dull, slow of action, little removed from the state of half-animated clay.

But when she found that she grew a little less subject to her hesitations, a shade more impulsive, she discovered that Ezra had ceased to insist on

the little physical contacts which she had allowed. He called her to his side and she went, but he would feel for her hand, draw her near, reach out to kiss her: and then let her go. Just as she had grown mildly adventurous, he seemed to relapse into a condition of content with the situation as it was.

One day she was so wrought upon by a new fear that she challenged him—only to get an answer that set her hopes on a dim, new pinnacle.

"You never pull me down to you now." (She said this though she knew she'd never let him!)

"No!" He smiled. "Reckon there'll be toime when we're married."

She started. So that was it. She drew near. She took a step back. It did not occur to her that the words had been spoken without passion. She was thinking of the words themselves. If . . . if marriage was possible. She had never let herself face that all too radiant possibility. She had dared not. . . . And *he* had spoken of the thing!

"You mean that?" she said very softly.

"Of course, I mean." He spoke firmly. "I think of that time when you go with me."

After that she had no doubts. She was content. She knew so much of her own mind and recognised that not mental awkwardness alone was responsible for her hesitation: her rigid maidenliness, seeking and finding a foundation, oddly enough, on her masculine temper, had made her hold herself away. But if she could wait for marri-

age, she'd here and now make comfortable terms with herself. A situation that had seemed charged with difficulty became clear and simple.

But her mind, still direct and still masculine in the character of its purpose, now studied to bring about the very end that once had seemed too fantastic to be possible. If the secret could be kept so long, why not marriage? It was herself he wanted, not the body of some shadowy young woman. He would forgive her afterwards—if he thought there was anything to forgive!

Every new minute was a miracle supporting her. The dream should have been shattered in an hour after it had been dreamed. But Ezra's avoidance of company, their joint remoteness from a small village, itself remote from the world, had allowed the thing to go on. Its persistence was all against common sense and common chance. Yet—it persisted still!

CHAPTER VIII

Diana, when she wanted to win a position, went for it. But her staff work was good.

She meant to drive out Doris. But the girl only came to "theirs" because, like the fool she was, she thought Ezra was the spoilt darling of an affectionate and rich, if outwardly penurious, uncle. She thought she saw promise of comfort and of a place in local society above that of her father.

Diana could have told Doris something of Westerby's "affection" for his nephew. But she knew that she held down the old man easily enough now (what a lot of people she was holding down one way or another, she reflected).

Westerby would play no more tricks. And it was just possible that he'd refrain out of compunction and the thought that it would be the hotter for him when he died if he didn't try, in death, to serve the nephew who now wouldn't, by dying, serve him. There was so little policy in old Westerby's goings-on that the hideous old fool and blackguard might yet leave Ezra something—if there was anything to leave.

But was there? What were those mysterious hints he'd sometimes dropped when tipsy in the bar of the "Pickled Walnut"? Were they founded

on anything but a boozed fool's imagination? Yet she could remember that he'd begun to mumble, even when sober and in her presence, about that picture he'd got and that somebody—some old fool like himself—had told him had value.

She found a moment to reproach herself. In all these speculations, she was thinking not of Ezra but of herself. It was desirable and necessary that some provision should be made for him—otherwise he'd have nothing but his pension—a poor thing at best. Yet here she was wishing him to have nothing to hope for from his uncle!

Yes, while trying to wish him provided for, the natural woman was growing fierce and demanding: *would* he or would he not suffer, if he got a little money from his uncle, plus Doris—and lost her, Diana?

What sort of love could that weed of a woman give him? Couldn't one see her, with her tepid little affections wearing out early, her mild but growing impatience with the helpless blind man for whom she'd made herself responsible? Oh yes, for a few months, he'd prefer to pat that soft pretty-pretty, young thing. Prefer? It wouldn't be a preference —since he'd not know what *she* was till they were married (he shouldn't know, she cried fiercely). And then she'd so smother him with her passion that he'd know only her, pursue only her, carry only her image within the curtain of his blindness.

But Doris could only be interested in him as long as she had the grotesque fancy that he carried with him ease and position for herself. Diana assured her heart that she had only to ascertain the scale of Westerby's intentions to rid herself of Doris. And with Doris gone she could then possess herself of Ezra. She said that to herself with an assumption of confidence. If Doris went and none other came, and if she was constantly beside him, comforting him, amusing him —yes, and making love to him, would he not at last find it impossible to do without her and so regard the question of their relative ages as irrelevant?

Ah—that was it. It was no case of man to man now. It was a matter of a woman—a woman wounded, as every lover is wounded. A lover is never whole, just as he is never overwhelmingly confident. When he is either he is no lover.

She was contrasting the Diana she'd always been conscious of with the new Diana who, in the midst of a situation in which cunning was demanded as never before, stood quivering and uncertain of her words. It was curious that when she had Westerby at her mercy she had not hesitated for a word, while now, when on what he chose to tell her might depend the preservation of her love, she approached him doubtfully. Not that she lacked some moral authority derived from her earlier encounter with the man. She could see that he re-

ceived her uneasily. He knew himself innocent of any intention of further adventure in crime, but the few wits left to him could not always satisfy him that Diana wasn't planning to punish him. She noticed that he never dared now to frown directly at her: he worked off his anger on others—as now when, beginning with business, she mentioned a name.

"Oh, the Badgetts' bill go out again for the third time!"

"How much be it?"

"Matter of four pound by now. I say we'd deliver no more."

The man frowned: and having frowned, he half rose, his lips working before he spoke again. He knew he was old. It took him a minute sometimes to "rouse up." When he was roused he was angry and ready to do anything. But in the past he'd often demanded measures that it took her all her time to stop him from insisting on further. He had always irritated her by the stupidity of his vengeances. But his new fear of her now controlled his tongue.

Diana knew that in earlier days she would have told Westerby lightly that she would go and see the Badgetts and ask what they were prepared to do. But she saw that Westerby wasn't going easily to be quieted: and she understood. He feared her and, fearing her, he was working off the malice and truculence that once might have been exerted

against her, against the smaller people in his path. The weak and malicious, afraid to strike at the strong, welcome the presence of a minor enemy.

"I'll have those Badgetts. I'll take 'em to court, I will." He'd collected his ideas at last and found speech. "Yes, I will. No use anybody arguing about that because I reckon I got my mind made up! A house that never pay, never mane to pay. The only thing that make 'em pay is—court!"

It was a curious performance, this ferocity against the absent debtor, coupled with a sort of cringing appeal, by means of a turn of the head, to Diana to agree that vengeance was called for. But Diana would not agree.

"Don't you forgit—you can't afford to lose them——"

"What loss are they to me?" His unclean rag of beard, with the broken yellow teeth showing in the wide mouth above it, wagged up and down. "Yes, what loss? Nawthen! They're worth nawthen to me!"

"They got friends that pay reg'lar. They *can* pay. They will pay if they're left. They got to be humoured. But if we quarrel with them they'll tell their friends that we threaten them——"

"They'll lie if they say that! They'll lie in their throats and they'll know it. I reckon I'll let 'em have the writ this toime——"

"And lose a bit more," she sneered. "We can't afford to lose a bit more."

"Can't we? *Can't* we now? Some people" (once he'd have said "you") "think I'm nigh bust! They reckon I got to come out o' mine. Well," with a croaking laugh, as if with triumph, "what if I *am* a pore man? I reckon I got enough to keep going a year or two longer and pay for a praper funeral when they come to mine to carry me off." Here he whined a little, but Diana merely laughed. "And what more do I want?"

"What about—about your nephew? You forgit you got him now."

"Got him now, have I? *Have* I? Got him!"

His words were the strangest mixture of contempt, defiance and terror. He wanted to put beyond doubt the fact that he had no intention of doing anything for his nephew: but the declaration was horribly involved with memories of a late interview with the woman he now addressed in which his plans for his nephew's future had been exposed with a terrible frankness. Beginning "If that bor Ezra think I going to leave him a lot to live on, he can git that out of his head," he finished with a half suppliant glance at Diana: "Not but what I don't wish the bor well. I wore always fond of the bor. He wore my sister's son."

"You do a lot for her!" said Diana, who could not always control her tongue! "And you show how fond you wore of the bor!"

He turned. What was her game now? He had

never been satisfied that she wasn't capable of re-opening that matter.

"That little business, now! It end," he said slowly, thickly, apprehensively. It was half a declaration but it was also a plea.

She answered with a laugh. "Yes, it's finished. . . . But your nephew live with you—he don't die on your hands"—she paused grimly and was rewarded by a shudder from the old man—"and living with you, he might think you do something——"

"Here," said Westerby with sudden dark suspicion, "who git the idea that Ezra got to expect from me? He been talking?"

"No." She felt suddenly thrust back on herself. "No, of course not! I don't know what he think. How do I know that?"

"Oh, yer don't!" He didn't know why he'd gained a point, but he felt vaguely that he had done so. He was wagging his head, his disgusting mouth was open again, so that the saliva slid over the lower lip to the beard below.

She was asking herself whether some new suspicion had reached his unclean ears. Had the dirty young puppy, Tubb . . . But, no, she thought she'd muzzled that unsavoury animal. . . . Had Ezra said something himself? Did Westerby think she had an interest in his unhappy nephew—apart altogether from her recent protective action?

She moved out of the light of the window so

that his peering, wet eyes should not stare into her face.

"No, I don't know what he think. I just know, what I think you ought to remember—he happen to be a blind man."

"Ought I now? Ought I to remember that?"

"I think you ought!"

She knew now why she had lost initiative: she was fighting against herself now, as well as against this horrible old sinner.

What was she doing now but pressing him to help Ezra? Why was she doing that when her heart knew that she wanted Ezra, for the time being at least, to depend solely on her. How *she* would serve him, provide him with everything! Her genius for the land—she knew she had something in her—would flame, once he was her own. But he must have nothing but what she gave. And yet here she was pleading for him, begging his uncle—supposing he had any money at all—to give Ezra the means by which he could marry—say—Doris, or some other girl of his own age, and the knowledge of the gift which would ensure that Doris would not leave him.

"You think I ought to help the bor? *Do* you? You don't happen to remember that I'm, as the saying go, on my last legs—with the farm as well as with this body o' mine. What bit o' capital I got, go on this place. You ought to know that!"

She did know it. But she didn't know till now

quite definitely that there was nothing locked up out of sight. Being sober, he made no boast of mysterious possessions. She knew now all she wanted.

"So that when—when—you . . ."

"Yes," he said angrily, hurrying forward the word for her—"when I die, I got nothing for him, and the farm go back to the landlord. Of course it go back! That Ashplant, he say he only let me stop on a day because he know I'm at the end o' things. He say he won't promise to let me die here."

That, too, she had suspected to be the case. But she knew now, knew that Ezra would have none but herself.

"So that if he outlive you, he'll only have his pension?"

"That be true. And he's lucky that he have that, *I* reckon."

She slipped out. She had come by the knowledge she had wanted without having to lead up to or contrive anything. The facts had emerged as the result of a commonplace conversation about the slowness of the well-to-do and noticeably vulgar Badgetts in paying their just dues. People who believed in teaching tradespeople a lesson—when those commercially minded persons ventured to ask for payment for food supplied! But she wasn't thinking about the Badgetts. She could trust herself to deal with them and to get the

money from them when she wanted it. She couldn't trust herself to deal with the information she'd now gained.

It was necessary, however, that she should find a means of telling Doris that there would be nothing to be gained by pursuing a blind man—this particular blind man, anyway.

She waited with divided feelings for the girl's coming. She hated that she should come at all and, as before, tormented herself with the thought that Doris came because she'd discovered encouragement. On the other hand, she was impatient to see her and tell her a truth that should then banish her for ever.

But next day, when the enemy did not appear, Diana knew that she was relieved. Doris could not feel quite confident of her kingdom. Diana went in to see Ezra, as she'd done every day. It was four o'clock. When she was able to go at that time she could give him his tea.

"It dew seem noice you come now," he said. "I been that sick o' myself. A man that live by himself all day and not git a visit from a soul git praper sick. It do me good to hear you come."

"It do you good to hear anybody come," she teased. She said the words and waited anxiously. Would he protest as once he'd done when, soon after he'd first spoken of love, he ridiculed the idea that the coming of anyone but she could move him. Would he? . . .

"I reckon you're right." Her heart felt sick with fear. "I reckon a man loike me loike to have anybody come. There wore that mawther that come t'other day. She wore wun'ful welcome."

"And I'm not?"

"You come here, young woman, and don't git runty or I'll clout yer."

She drew nearer. She was desperately unhappy, because she wasn't convinced.

"What would you do? What would you do that you wouldn't do for anybody else?"

She took another step and then halted. She had heard a movement in the yard. His head turned expectantly, and she looked round to see Doris in the doorway.

"You didn't send any order to-day, Miss Cliss."

No. Diana had meant to use the order as an excuse for going to the shop after tea, seeing Doris and telling her of Ezra's position. She was suddenly in a panic. Had the girl overheard any of their talk? Had she learnt enough to know that the position which a word could destroy actually existed under her nose? But Doris was only smiling politely, scarcely glancing at Ezra, though in her next remark, apparently merely from motives of mere good manners, she included him.

"I'm afraid I come in just when you were going to have tea——"

"Don't hurry away. You just come."

The words came from Ezra. Diana suppressed her rising anger—anger with herself for having delayed in going to the shop and there short-circuiting the action of the pretty interloper. How she hated the girl! But she knew she must not show feeling.

She must just wait politely for Doris to go. And Doris was already taking a step to the door. When she was outside, Diana would follow her, get into further talk, express her pity for the poor blind man who was liable at any moment to find himself homeless. She was even thinking of phrases: her staff work was still good: something about "I know there are silly ideas going about that the poor bor is to be left a lot by his uncle when the truth is he'll have nothing. I thought once he might git married"—yes, be bold and you'd not be suspected of yourself having designs! "I thought once he might git married. But the girl that marry him would have to keep him." Yes. That would finish Doris off for ever. If only the girl would go, and begin her walk over the path to the village. . . .

But Ezra was speaking. "Reckon we might give Miss Ranson a cup o' tea, Miss Diana?"

Diana started. She knew she couldn't quite suppress the flush of annoyance that wasn't really annoyance at all but passionate anger. Then she recovered: at least he had remembered to call her respectfully "Miss." But she was newly wounded by the thought that the girl couldn't for a moment

suppose that Ezra might be interested in a woman as old as herself.

"Of course you must stay," she was saying mechanically.

"Oh, but of course not!" The words, surprising Diana, came from Doris.

"You *got* to stop!" said Ezra: and Diana sought now to support him, if only to investigate the genuineness of the girl's refusal.

But Doris, with a little flush rising, a flush that mystified and disturbed Diana afresh, said quietly: "Oh, I must go. I will—I will come another day. You got Miss Cliss to-day. I'll come when you alone. But to-day there's nobody in the shop. I promise father to help——"

She was already back in the doorway and going out. But Diana wasn't looking at her. She was looking at the man. Was Ezra seriously disappointed? She tried to convince herself that he was not, but ended in being unable to decide anything. What was the real explanation of this enigma that was Ezra?

She turned her eye upon the girl now, in time to catch Doris's eye as it rested for a moment on the blind man. There was commiseration. Yes, but was there something else? What was meant by that polite reference to herself—"You've got Miss Cliss. I'll come when you're alone." Was there in fact an understanding between these two achieved in her absence? Was the present withdrawal a mere

bit of strategy? She shrugged her shoulders without knowing or caring if the gesture were read by the girl. Then with a glance at Ezra as if she would arrest his thoughts and hold them back till she returned, she followed Doris. She made as if she came to bid a careless goodbye such as, in villages, comes easily.

"Yes," she was murmuring, "it wore good o' you to come up!" She was hoping Doris hadn't noticed her disapproval of Ezra's invitation. But at any rate Doris didn't seem to bear malice, for she smilingly disclaimed kindness.

"I was passing. I think I just look in for a minute—in case——" ("In case he's alone," thought Diana.)

"Well, it wore kind. Poor Ezra like to be quiet. He's not good tidily."

"He look well, I thought."

"Yes, but"—rather irrelevantly as it seemed to her a moment later—"what I keep thinking is what happen to him when his uncle go? He got only his poor bit o' pension."

"His uncle fare to give him the farm and things, I reckon."

"No. That's it. Mr. Westerby tell me not. He say that quite definite."

"What? Did you ask him?" Doris said suddenly.

Diana started, but recovered almost at once: she could not discover that Doris was moved by anything but mild astonishment that Westerby's

housekeeper could be bold enough to make her employer show her his will.

"I *happen* to ask him. And he tell me. So what going to become of his poor nephew, I can't think. Well, no, there's no order to-night. But don't send up in the morning unless the boy like to call. I'll be in the village myself in the afternoon."

With that she had escaped. But Doris now *knew*! She knew that she need have no expectations whatever of Ezra, as signified by Ezra's uncle.

Diana went back. She was satisfied that she'd disposed of Doris. But she was not quite easy. Ezra was waiting. She thought he looked displeased.

"Why didn't the mawther stop when we ask her?" he demanded.

Diana felt a little emotion of relief pass through her. She'd expected to be made, in some sort, a culprit. But she was coupled with himself as having given the invitation.

"She had to go," she said easily. "She tell me she only look in because she pass. She got to git back."

"Oh, well," said Ezra with a shrug, and turned towards the table.

Very quietly she set to work upon tea. She said nothing. She needed the time to recover.

But she'd finished with Doris.

One more battle: one more victory.

Ezra! To keep him! To hold him! Ezra!

CHAPTER IX

DIANA'S next battle was of another kind. She believed she'd disposed of Ashplant. He'd accepted a payment on account. But little fires in the minds of men of his type are never extinguished: they smoulder. It took him a week to decide he'd been cajoled. It took him another week to decide that defeat was not final. His reactions were the normal ones of a weak and conceited man who likes to think himself an example of masculine moral force: he felt he had let himself down. He had been beaten by a woman who was not even a beautiful woman. There must be a reversal of the position. She had induced him to hold his hand till the end of the next quarter. But at the time she had attacked him that quarter was well on its way.

In less than six weeks he could put Westerby out.

He had a further reason for action. Unknown to Westerby or that housekeeper of his, a "warm" brewer man from Gippeswyk had been nosing round the little farm and had decided he'd like to have the reversion of the tenancy. He'd pay a year in advance to get in. There wasn't even a commercial reason for allowing old Westerby any more rope.

And so, in due course, Westerby was staring angrily at a baldly-put letter from Ashplant's solicitor. Suddenly he exploded.

"The botty swine! This house dew be moine and it wore my father's. And he think he put me out. I'll—I'll fight him. I don't mind if I swing by the neck for shootin' him. I'll give him what Rush give old Jermy."

"No, you won't!" said Diana, who had listened to the outburst with distress in her heart for what this must mean for her relation to Ezra, but with her usual calm in facing desperate situations. "No good you talking big now about murder. You come off murder." She smiled grimly. "You got no money, and Mr. Ashplant can put you out. And as for you doing a man in, I thought"—with a sneer—"I cure you of that!"

"You—you——" But he stopped, came to heel at once, submitted abjectly to surrender his violence. "But it dew seem hard! Live here, man and boy, and don't have the money."

"Because why? Because you drink it up. That's why. And you let the place go to rack and rue, and now it *can't* pay."

"I might have had a bit o' money," he began moistly. "I think once I wore going to git a bit."

"By doing a bit o' murder?"

He winced, looked as if he'd call out at her, decided to surrender again and said meekly:

"There wore that picture——"

"Oh, I heard o' that picture," she said contemptuously.

"Well, a man tell me it was what they buy—them that buy things like that!"

"Oh, indeed, and what might it be worth?"

"Oh, *he* offer me a matter o' twenty pound. And I say I'll think. And I never see him again."

"And which is the picture—that thing in your bedroom? That old thing? Don't wonder he didn't come back. He must have been drinking when he offer twenty pound!"

"Well, I didn't want to sell. It wore my father's." He accompanied the last words with that dreary whine that she knew well as the cry for pity from an old man in whom the habit of cunning still feebly works.

She left him, saying confidently she'd see Mr. Ashplant. She did not fear to go up to the house again, though she thought it ominous that so soon after appearing to surrender to her plea he should reverse his attitude. She had thought his manner treacherously amiable, though she could still trust herself to deal with the man effectively. But this time he'd used a lawyer to send the notice and the notice was clearly intended to be final.

But she must beat the man. If she did not do so, the little household of which she was a member would be broken up and her lover be banished. She'd fight—*how* she'd fight!

She went up to the Hall. She asked for Mr.

Ashplant—asked firmly as if taking no refusal.

But refusal was exactly what, this time, she had to take.

The butler, she saw, had been instructed.

"Mr. Ashplant go away. And he say he cannot see nobody, Miss Cliss."

"When will he be back?"

"He say he don't know. And he say he can't see anybody when he come back to his, and that the business that concern Mr. Westerby have to go through the solicitors at Gippeswyk. He say that. He say tell that to anybody that come."

"Meaning *me*?" Diana snorted fiercely.

"Very loikely, Miss Cliss, meaning you."

"All right!"

Diana walked through the grounds calmly and slowly. Nobody should read defeat in her face or manner. And, as she knew, even now she wasn't defeated. Ashplant—a gentleman—was afraid of her! That was a minor triumph in itself. He feared to see her lest she beat him again. Well, she would beat him!

She *must* beat him.

For if she didn't, circumstances, so grim and threatening, would beat her. Ezra would have to go, and if he went she must lose him for ever. That romance of hers, cradled in error and feeding on fantasy, must die in a moment at the hand of the first enemy, at the raising of the voice of truth.

II

With £250 owing, there was no help this time to be got from her own poor little savings.

But—God helped those who helped themselves. She'd helped and she'd gone on struggling to help. Had she not now qualified for the help of Heaven?

Help was nearer than she believed. Help is often nearer than we believe.

Afterwards she used to remember the aspect of old Westerby as she'd seen him sitting, moist and repulsive, saliva mixing with his dirty bit of beard, and with his red eyes glaring at that notice to quit: and then of the old man's mumbling talk of a picture he'd got that might be worth twenty pounds.

She hadn't challenged his claim for his picture: it wasn't worth challenging. She knew the picture, since she dusted its frame every day. It was done in oils and took up some space, but it was shabby—or the frame was. And so far as she could see it was quite without importance of any kind. A picture—a real picture—was something in a gold frame. But most of the gold of this picture had gone. And apart from the gold frame it wasn't a picture, for it meant nothing. She had once told Ezra about it.

"He think it valuable! It hang there for donkeys' 'ears. And what is it? Nawthen! It don't look loike a *rale* picture, not even loike the ones they give when you buy *Home and Beauty*—a picture with

something you can understand. There was a picture of fishing boats and all the wives on shore waving as they come in. It was called 'Safe Home.' And they give away another picture of a girl and an officer looking at his sword that they called 'To defend the Right.' Now they seem pictures that *wore* pictures. But this thing that your uncle own just show a lot o' fields loike anybody that have the knack fare to draw. He go on saying it wore worth twenty pound, but you got to humour him."

"Yes," said Ezra, "that's right. You got to."

And so Westerby was being humoured.

But the night after Ashplant's final notice had come in, Westerby said something about his picture that made Diana, for the first time, listen.

"That Ashplant can sell me up if he want to. And he'd want to. Everything go then! Wish now I'd taken that twenty pound."

"What twenty pound?"

"That the man offer for the picture!"

Diana stood up. "You don't mean to say you *refused* twenty pound? I thought you said he just tell you it was worth twenty pound. You never say he offer to pay——"

"Oh, he offer to pay. He want to take it off. I say if he offer me a hundred I'd not let him have it. I'd got a bit in those times. And I want to spite him."

"And what did he say then?" said Diana softly.

"What he say? To test me he say, suppose I give you a hundred, would you hand it over now? And I say, no I won't. I know it wore just trying to bother me. So's he could laugh and go off."

"I wonder!" Diana was thinking hard. "I wonder! Who was this man? . . ."

For, suddenly, her suspicions were aroused. In a remote corner of her memory was a thought of what she'd heard of men who went round farm-houses looking for old pictures. She didn't know why they wanted them old. But this picture of Westerby's *was* old. True, it was without any attraction that she could discover: it wasn't a picture of anything in particular: it looked as if the man had painted the background for something and then forgot to put in the story.

But it *was* old.

And Westerby might have met somebody who liked things of that sort.

"Who was he? Who was this man that come and throw money at you that you wouldn't pick up?"

"I can't say! He come and he go with a flea in his ear. Donkeys' 'ears ago that wore. Before *your* time—so it must have been donkeys' 'ears ago," he added, with sly malice. Diana flushed, but the flush turned from one of self-consciousness to anger.

"Well, it's a pity you don't remember when a man throw money at you and you not having any at all to pay your just debts."

She had recovered the initiative. He was easily defeated these days.

"Tollington," he said suddenly. "I believe that wore the name."

"You don't mean the man in Gippeswyk?"

"Aye. It's the nephew now, I expect."

Diana took away the information. How should she discover more? This man, Tollington, might be honest. But she suspected everybody when dealing with conditions of which she had no experience. In buying a milker she'd know where she was: she'd give credit for honesty. In this picture business she'd trust nobody out of her sight.

She decided she'd try other means if there were any. She looked through her daily paper but found no name of a person advertising for pictures. She determined to go into Gippeswyk after all.

She told her intent to Westerby.

"I'm going to git Tollington," she said.

"Tollington? The chap that I see——"

"Yes! I'd not be skeered of him coming to ours, loike I might be if he wore one o' the big picture folk in Gippeswyk. So he can come. And he can just give a value. We don't sell to him and we tell him that. So we git a rale opinion."

Westerby submitted. He did not always like Diana's handling of a situation. It made few concessions to his feelings, and fewer than ever of late. But somehow she got out of people terms that he couldn't.

And so the dealer from the county town was summoned and came.

When Tollington arrived, a clerkly-looking man in middle life with what she called weeping eyes, Diana thrust him into the position of judge at once. He wasn't to buy. So "No good in you quoting as little as you think and then saying take it or leave it, Mr. Tollington." She rallied him as she rallied the cattle market: "Your uncle tell Mr. Westerby it wore a good picture. Mr. Westerby say he offer twenty pound and go to a lot more than that——"

"Oh, aye?" said Tollington courteously, with a courteously doubting smile. "Of course I know nothing of that. But I'll be pleased to see the picture."

"You do, and remember you just got to say if the picture seem worth selling to a man that pay big prices."

"I'm not to buy, or try to, eh?" as a twinkle appeared in the moist eye.

"No, you not. You remember you just an old friend of ours that try to do his duty to us."

Westerby, coming up behind, guffawed. His laborious sense of humour seemed to be aroused.

"Yes, if I *got* to sell, just you say it look a picture worth ten thousand pound and a bit more, Tollington. You say that and p'raps I give you a fiver for your pains."

Tollington was being led upstairs. In the door-

way he turned his eye to the picture and started.

Diana, who was following, started too. She realised that something was happening—happening to the man in front of her.

"It look, Mr. Westerby—it look to me almost like a Constable!"

"A what?"

"A Constable!"

"Constable?"

"The greatest painter we got! D'yer mean my old uncle not tell you when you say he see it?"

"He tell me nawthen."

"Oh well!"—he must defend his uncle's memory—"I expect he offer what he think fair. In his day they didn't think so much of Constable. Not a lot, they didn't. It's different to-day. Well—yes—I'd say you got a real fine picture and," he began to peer at the canvas, "it's a Constable all right. It'll have to be vetted before we can say more, but it'll sell at auction!"

He paused, his manner revealing a strain of curiosity mingled oddly with irritation.

"What I want to know is, how did my uncle let that picture stop with you? And how do it come that it's not known? I mean, it's not a known Constable. But it's a fine picture. I'm just a bit peeved I never hear of it. Me living on the spot."

"But you don't think——" began Diana uneasily.

"That it's not the goods? My dear lady, it's the

real thing. I'm nigh sure. I can't see a signature but I call it a Constable. There's that extraordinary way with what they call tones that he more or less invent. I've seen a lot of his pictures, and up to a point I can speak and feel sure. But I'd want to git an expert in the subject to confirm what I say. I can git a man down for you—if you like. He'd very likely take it to London to sell. Or he might buy."

"What would he give?"

"Oh, that depend on a lot. It depend on if he think it a Constable. It depend on if he think it a good Constable. But Constables sell for hundreds."

"Hundreds!" cried Diana. She did not let her calm desert her. But she knew she was moved.

As for the dealer, he was still looking at the picture. Indeed it seemed to Diana that he was doing more: he wasn't merely eyeing it, he was watching it. She didn't understand her own thought. Only long afterwards did the idea occur to her that he expected it suddenly to tell him something. Perhaps, she then thought, if you went on staring long enough at a thing of the kind, it betrayed itself, communicated something to you about its age, history or what-not.

It was all very odd—this business of the inspection by Tollington. One curious thing was that Westerby was ignored. He, the owner, stood slouchingly in a corner. He was bemused, not by what he heard of the painter but by

mention of the possible price. Once or twice he made as if to interrupt, but she managed, as she'd often done before, to silence him. "Well, reckon it's mine," he protested once. But the protest was feeble enough.

When she marched Tollington downstairs she left her master behind. It took him a minute to decide to follow. He stumbled down, just as she finished speaking to Tollington:

"Then you'll git the man you speak of to come? When'll he fare to come, d'yer reckon, Mr. Tollington?"

"Can't say. When next he come this way, I expect. He make a round."

"What's his name?"

"Name? Gluck."

"And you'll send him?"

"Aye."

Tollington went away, leaving Diana in a condition outside her experience. For the first time she found herself to-day with her judgment completely at fault. She wouldn't have given ten shillings for that picture and she had thought Westerby a babbling fool when he boasted of his possession; and this Tollington said it might be worth hundreds. But she wasn't chagrined. She knew she'd had a success that might yet become an immense triumph. Her hopes were ascending. She saw herself commanding Gluck to pay "hundreds," and, by so doing, establishing Westerby

on the farm for the rest of his days. And if he stayed Ezra stopped too. And the achievement would be hers. She would have rescued Ezra.

She had no fears now. They were saved. The picture had saved them.

She wrote proudly and confidently to Ashplant in her big firm fist, "Mr. Westerby wish me to say in reply to your notice received, that he hope to pay in full on day required. Yours faithfully, D. Cliss."

Afterwards she wondered at a Diana who departed from her old caution and promised money before it was in her fingers to pay. But her thought of Ezra dominated everything. She had rescued Ezra. And in the glow of that idea she could not hold her hand from telling Ashplant that the whole situation had changed. She told him, not to triumph over him or indeed with any thought of him at all, but in sheer happiness. She had saved her lover and her love . . . once more!

III

They knew most common human types round Drowning Marsh: gentlemen, farmers, that curious cross—gentlemen-farmers; labourers, smallholders, tradesmen, convinced idlers. The creature seen in the neighbourhood one overcast summer afternoon was not to be classified by any of the ordinary names.

Small, lean, dressed in baggy tweeds; bloated, with a red, tough face-skin rather like a crimson-leather bag, and a swollen and richly pimpled neck, he owned two physical features that, as he'd have put it himself, rang the bell. He had piercing red eyes, moist as was the veil that hung over them: and long, sensitive if chronically unclean fingers. He might have been an artist. He wasn't. He was, in his own self-description, "No more than a judge of artists. If you've got anything you want me to value, I'm here to do it. Otherwise don't ask me to tea."

Parodying the advertisements of the big West End firms, he advertised at intervals that he was visiting clients mentioned by local agents within a twenty-mile radius of Manchester, Birmingham or Gippeswyk as the case might be; and that others interested should promise to pay thirty-nine shillings and invite him to call. (Thirty-nine shillings because it's a funny sum and they're sure to remember it.)

He came to several doors in Suffolk. For the most part he came by direct invitation. For instance, the large vicar of Little Stokesby owned water colours by David Cox—or thought he did. Would Mr. Semple Gluck please call when next visiting the county: the vicar would be pleased to pay thirty-nine shillings. The pictures were by Cox. Mr. Gluck would arrange for their sale.

But now he was here: who else had treasure con-

cealed? The gratified clergyman swept his mind over his neighbours. He knew what the Glucks dreamed of: the discovery of the unrecognised canvas of a Rembrandt covering a pigsty roof.

"Can't think of anybody. Wait. There's an old chap—small farmer. He once told me he'd got a picture by somebody—and been told it was valuable. But you hear so much of such things and nothing ever comes of them——"

"What about your David Cox's?" sneered Mr. Gluck, and the parson apologised like a gentleman.

"Was your farmer's name Westerby?"

"Yes," said the large priest. "Unfriendly person. Probably want to throw you out."

"That won't hurt. Often been thrown. Besides we've heard of this chap. Tollington sent on a name and address. I was to see a person named Cliss, actually."

"Oh!" The vicar smiled his dim, unnecessary smile. "His housekeeper. Rather runs him, they say. Woman with a tongue."

"Well, it won't hurt me."

So there was Gluck in the doorway of Westerby's house, and Diana looking him up and down and not inwardly approving at all. She'd never seen the like, she told Ezra afterwards. "I think at first he wore not exactly and then I think he fare to show himself praper runty—too clever by half."

But she recognised that the man was going to

be very useful, blot on the landscape though he might be. He was here to rescue Westerby and give her the society of Ezra, and it was quite evident that this salient individual, who was nothing if not at ease in the presence of a lady, had every intention of serving her. He told her, with much play of the brilliant eyes and the long fingers (on one of which a diamond twinkled) that he understood from Mr. Tollington that she desired his attendance about a picture.

"I'll be happy to see same and advise. It doesn't often happen, of course, that we see anything of value—of the smallest value—but I don't say we have never done so——"

"Oh!" said Diana easily. "You needn't trouble to think there's nothing to see here. Because Mr. Tollington when he come here and see this picture, say it wore very valuable."

"Oh yeh?" He smiled as if to indicate that he was perfectly willing to tolerate even the opinions of a person as inferior to himself in judgment of canvas as Tollington. "Perhaps," he added mildly, "we might see the picture?"

"I expect you may. Mr. Westerby come."

For Westerby was in the doorway, staring at the back of the stranger. Diana had only just told him that she'd asked Tollington to send the London dealer. He didn't know what had been arranged: he was not very clear to-day about anything, having just retreated from the Pickled Walnut in

only comparatively good order. A suspicion suddenly sprang into his mind that this man Gluck was there to rob him.

He strode in truculently, nodding curtly.

"Tollington send you? Well, *I* didn't tell Tollington to send you."

Gluck smiled and rubbed his hands. The note of opposition coming from a person so obviously a half-tipsy fool amused him.

"Good day, sir. Good day. Pleased to meet you. I'm told you want me to look at your picture. Now not a word," as Westerby, glaring, opened his mouth in protest, "not a word. It's no trouble at all! You really mustn't exert yourself and you must not, of course, if I may say so, be disappointed if I can't confirm your hopes. Mr. Tollington, I'm afraid, put it into your head that your picture might just possibly be a Constable——"

"He said it *was* a Constable," put in Diana with easy assurance.

"Well, I'll see your picture, please. Not that I can share Mr. Tollington's hopes. He's an optimist, I'm afraid, is Mr. Tollington. In the country you come to think of geese as swans. So don't be too confident, Mr. Westerby." It pleased him to address Westerby while knowing that the brain present was Diana's. "It often happens that a gentleman like yourself thinks that he has got pictures that are of great value when they're nothing of the sort. Mere rubbish on the walls—

Tripe! Farmers' walls—" he glanced round with an impudent eye, ready to give these people a lesson: it was their part to appreciate properly the value of a call by an expert—"farmers' walls are more often than not covered with tripe. *You* know—sentimental love, the royal family at breakfast, the rich little boy giving his waistcoat to the poor little boy—a big dog allowing a little dog to bite its ears—and all the rest of the sickly school of paint that the half-educated love. So I'll admit quite frankly that I never have much hope myself of seeing a good picture when it's hinted that somebody's got a treasure." He paused. He thought that by now he must have sufficiently lowered the temperature of expectation. It was part of one's technique always to do so before inspecting a picture.

"Then you'd better come up," said Diana.

Up they went—Diana last. Coming behind the dealer she observed his large feet so silent in their rubber-soled shoes. Silence was usually a grace: she had never seen anything as gracelessly silent as those feet. She thought him sly and ugly and the silent feet part of the slyness and ugliness.

In the little bedroom with the iron bed and plain white cover, the one large picture over the mantelpiece looked out of scale.

Westerby had entered and was standing looking defiantly at the door where Gluck was now entering. He was, she could see, entering with an elabor-

ate air of indifference, but as his eye came upon the picture, she saw him stiffen, lift his head, draw a deep breath, and make an effort to control the sudden excitement that had come upon him.

She remembered Tollington as *he* had entered. But what she saw now was an effect different, because so much more profound, from that apparently created in the mind of the local dealer. There was the difference between the country tradesman and the brilliantly alert, eager and ambitious London man.

A moment later he was cool again. The elaborate technique he had acquired taught him never to express or exhibit satisfaction when he met an unknown picture. You should be kind, tolerant; extending the beams of your amiability from owner to picture and back to owner: no more.

"Yes. Quite a nice piece of work."

"Mr. Tollington say it *wore* by Mr. Constable," said Diana. She knew nothing about this Constable except that he "belonged": but she knew that his name counted with these people. Gluck smiled his friendly smile: his toleration was being stretched to include Tollington.

"Mr. Tollington said that, did he? You told me, I think. But I expect he informed you that I'm an expert specially interested in the English school and I've not yet said it's a Constable. It's a nice picture. It's an excellent picture."

"And you'd buy?"

The dealer pursed his fingers. "I'd have to consider. I'd have to examine the picture."

Actually he had begun to do so. He looked at the front with a microscope, and then, without asking permission, he laid the picture face down on the bed while he examined the back of the canvas.

Diana watched the eager fingers. She watched them so carefully and had so clear an idea of the situation generally that she scarcely glanced at the face with its air of disappointment—part of the technique—as Gluck turned the picture face uppermost again.

"I can't find what I'd like to find. But then I didn't expect to!" (Why, then, pretend to the disappointment you certainly don't feel? thought Diana.) "A picture is a tricky business. But I'm prepared to do what I can for you."

"You mean you want to buy him?" grunted Westerby, who by now had decided that he'd take money even from a robber. "You'll pay cash?"

"No, sir. What I'll do is this: I'll take it to London for an opinion. And then we'll put it in a sale."

"And then," said Diana, "it will fetch a big price? Mr. Tollington say that."

The dealer pursed his mouth. "It will fetch a big price if people like it. If it's accepted as a Constable it will sell for a good price—yes."

"What's a good price?" said Westerby abruptly.

"Oh, five hundred—a thousand!"

"And you think," Diana began, suppressing her eagerness, "it's sure to sell?"

"I think it'll sell for something. Yes—I can promise that it will not go unsold. If you leave the price to me. If you don't put on a reserve—it'll sell—for something! It's a nice picture. It'll sell."

He spoke with the utmost quiet. Yet Diana knew that the picture had impressed him more than he admitted. She was convinced that it was merely the natural caution of the man, a professional picture dealer, which prevented him saying more than he did. She knew that when Westerby grunted: "You won't buy him now?" it was important to put in: "We'd get a better price at auction."

"I'm not here to buy," said Gluck smoothly. "If my people sell your picture, we shall collect our commission. And you want us to sell it, sir, for the best price we can get?"

"That's right!" with a furtive glance at Diana that Gluck noticed. It was as he'd been told: that woman "ran" her master.

"Then, with your permission, I'll take the picture now. We are printing our catalogue tomorrow, so we shall be able to put it in our next sale."

As he had not put the picture back on the wall, after laying it on the bed for examination, he now

thrust it under an arm and moved to the door.

"Here! Where you take him?" Westerby was beginning. He didn't like the gross informality of thus removing something said to be of immense value—and that something still his. Even Diana was a little affronted by what seemed a lack of ceremony. But she was impatient for a speedy sale. She frowned at her master.

"Mr. Gluck take it the safest way. We couldn't send it safe. We'd not know how to pack it."

"As to packing," said the smooth Gluck, "I've got all I need in the car. I always carry cloth wrappings. We are constantly taking pictures away —when we think them worth it."

This by way of reminder to Westerby that it was lucky for him that the great London dealer would consent to handle his picture at all.

"Then you'll let us know as soon as *you* know?"

"We'll do that certainly, madam."

His last words were to Diana, whom he began to think was a remarkable woman.

Gluck now removed himself.

IV

Diana supposed Gluck would write next day. But it was Westerby who first became restive.

"That man not send any message?"

"No."

"I expect he sell and keep the money!" with the gloomy suspicion of ignorance and stupidity.

"Oh no. It'll be all right, I reckon. He fare to take his time."

She was not herself uneasy. She knew that these London firms would be honest if only in their own interest. But she confirmed her judgment when next in Gippeswyk by a call on Tollington.

Tollington was highly comforting. "You got to give him a week to fix things."

"Mr. Westerby don't understand and he worry."

"He needn't. Tell him from me that he got a Constable and that a Constable sell for more than most to-day. I can remember when it wasn't so. There was Ruskin and his lot—you'll not, perhaps, know of him—that say things against Constable and push Turner. But that's forty years ago. There isn't a better thought of man to-day among the English painters than Constable. That I can tell you. Anybody that have the luck to own one of his pictures can have eight hundred, a thousand, two thousand in his pocket!"

"Two thousand?" Diana's mind seized upon the thought of the overwhelming effect of that sum. She'd have to see that Westerby didn't squander it. She'd got rid of Doris: Westerby should keep his money after paying his debt, and provide for Ezra: and if Doris heard now . . . But by the time the money was paid and the debt settled other

things might have happened. She knew what other things . . .

"You think, Mr. Tollington, that it have a fair chance of fetching a big lot o' money?"

"I don't think—I *know*. If my experience is worth anything, Miss Cliss, it tell me that that picture is a gem! A perfect gem! It's got all the marks of a Constable, except the signature. But even if it wasn't by him, it's such a beautiful picture that it would be sure to sell." He paused, but came back to confirm her hopes. "It's a magnificent piece of work. It's an unknown example I know. But it's Constable! Its history is all in favour of it's being Constable. And its appearance and style are all in support. Don't you worry!"

"*I* wasn't worrying," said Diana calmly. "It wore Mr. Westerby."

But she went home and told Westerby: and Westerby was comforted in those parts of his moral being in which cupidity was exercised. He even boasted mysteriously in the Pickled Walnut that he was expecting "a little money."

"Where it come *from*, Mr. Westerby?"

"Where do it come from any time it come but from somebody's pocket?"

That was all the information available.

But Diana made plans. Particularly did she look forward to being the bearer of the cheque to that insistent landlord of theirs, with his treacherous smile and his insulting indifference to women

who, in his judgment, were no longer young enough to be worth the attention of his eager eye.

She thought of the words she'd use. She'd be outwardly even abjectly civil. "I dare say, sir, you thought we were talking big when we say we pay all the money on the right day. But Mr. Westerby try to do what he say. He always pay his debts." That would take some swallowing, but the landlord should swallow it!

Her only anxiety was Westerby. If he got money he'd go on the drink again. One of the advantages of recent poverty was that it had kept him comparatively sober. She took him in hand tactfully. She knew that since her exposure of his criminal intent she had had him in a suitably subdued condition.

"When you git that money—two thousand, Mr. Tollington say it'll be—you'll have to put it by. You got to think of your nephew then. You fare to owe him a lot. Don't you forgit that. No, you *didn't* give him a home! You try to do him in! That's what you do!"

He nodded with a flash of the old truculence. But he submitted at once and nodded, this time as if he conceded all things.

Diana waited tranquilly for the news from Gluck. After her talk with Tollington she had none of the impatience shown by Westerby.

She thought how her desire to hold Ezra was to be satisfied. She would try to remember the

picture, as so often she had seen it when she had dusted it. *That* thing, that from her point of view, wasn't a picture at all—to save Westerby, Ezra, herself, and her love!

Afterwards she remembered, with the greatest clearness, the coming of the letter. There it was with the typewritten address:

EDWIN WESTERBY, ESQ.,
The Old Farm,
Drowning Marsh,
Suffolk.

She turned it over. It would contain the cheque!

When Westerby came in she thrust the letter before him. "The cheque for the picture! That letter!" He opened it quickly, tearing the envelope to shreds. He held it up before his eyes, held it away, and then grunted angrily.

"The cheque!"

"Let *me* see!" She took it from him without his consent.

"DEAR SIR" [she read],

"We have had your picture most carefully examined by the best authorities on the period and they all agree that, though a charming work and fully equal to the best examples of the school, it is not by Constable. The painter may have been a pupil. That being the case, it would be futile to set up hopes of a large price being

obtained at auction. We should not feel justified even in inserting in our catalogue the claim that it was 'attributed to Constable' as we are sometimes able to do when not satisfied that a picture is by the master.

"Nevertheless as we have the picture here, we shall be pleased to include it in the next sale, but we desire to warn you that we could not expect in the most favourable circumstances to obtain a price above £50–£80. It is only because the picture is so excellent a piece of work that we feel ourselves justified in anticipating a sale at as high a figure as the one we quote. If, in the circumstances, you prefer to have the picture returned to you, we shall be glad to forward at once.

"Awaiting your esteemed commands,
We are, Sir,
Your obedient Servants,
FALLACE, SYMONS, GLUCK & Co."

Diana stood staring at the paper. She took no notice of her master's anger. She was scarcely conscious of it. She knew that what she saw was not merely Gluck's unctuous commiseration, but first the contemptuous triumph in the face of Ashplant, whose mercies would now be less tender than before: second the sale of the little farm: and third, the expulsion of Ezra and the loss of him to herself for ever. For once remove him from his present

place of segregation and the truth must reach him at once. It was a continuous miracle that it had not reached him already.

She thought angrily of Ashplant, and of her folly in seeking a premature triumph over him. Why had she been so over-confident, she who had always prided herself on her wisdom in awaiting the fulfilment of Life's promises? But she knew how she must answer. Her wisdom had always been at fault where Ezra was concerned. She was always, when she thought of him, what he believed her to be—young, confident, impulsive!

She had thought they were now to have the years firmly in their possession. She knew now that they had the few days between now and Quarter day!

Seeking consolation, she took the letter to Tollington, and had the satisfaction of seeing that the man was shocked. But it angered her to see his simple acquiescence in the verdict.

"It's a good picture, yes! But there's no going agin those London expert fellers. They know. It's their business to know."

"But you said it wore a wun'ful picture."

"I did. I say it still. *They* say it, if you look at yon letter. A picture can be exactly as fine as if Constable paint it, but it don't fetch the same money—any money at all sometimes. People don't just pay for a thing they see: they pay to believe it is something they want it to be. When we find it

isn't what it make us happy to believe it was, we're no longer happy I'm afraid! If I'd bought your picture at the beginning I'd have been quite happy I'd got a Constable, and I might have kept it for years waiting for a buyer and believing all the time."

She went away, driving herself home furiously. And it was only now that a thought presented itself to her mind that put her in "joparte" of losing control of her wheel. Diana was suddenly aware of a dreadful parallel.

If Tollington had bought their picture at the beginning, he would have been happy believing it a Constable—yet though it would be the same picture when he knew it wasn't a Constable his happiness in its possession would have gone.

Ezra was drawn to her because he believed she was a young woman. She would be the same woman if he knew the truth but . . . would his attitude be the same?

She thrust the doubt from her, though she knew that the parallel, imperfect as it might be in some respects, was there to haunt her for ever!

To her heart she cried that the man loved her for what he conceived her to be. She *was* that thing. She was, she was, she WAS!

CHAPTER X

Diana, in her new expansiveness, had told Ezra about the picture which was to relieve them of all their anxieties. He had shown less excitement than she had expected. He had disappointed her by his unconcern.

But now that the blow had fallen and she knew that the picture was not to rescue them, she had less fear in telling Ezra the truth.

When she'd finished a shamefaced recital, he laughed.

"It don't matter. So it seem to me."

"Yes, but, my dear, what happen to you?"

"Can't say! But *that* don't matter."

He dismissed the subject. But he seemed occupied. She challenged him at last.

"Penny, if they're worth it, for your thoughts."

He laughed.

"When you wore in Gippeswyk seeing Mr. Tollington, I have a visit."

She started. She didn't like to hear of too many visits. But he began, in a long and oddly hesitating speech, to explain how he'd had an experience unlike anything he had known: and yet an experience to the scope of which he could see both himself and all other men in his particular

case, being adapted with the greatest ease. It was, he thought, something which ought to come to every man struck blind in mid-career. He might have added that it was not merely appropriate to the range of experience of all such men: it helped to complete experience, to give it an artistic integrity which it could not otherwise achieve.

He was, he told her, sitting in the doorway of his cottage leaning on a stick. He'd said before that he found such an attitude best assisted thought. She could see him now as then, his lean, alert face craned forward, hovering above the long, powerful fingers gripping the stick's handle: the effect was one of a mind exercised with its own problems, even if ready to transfer itself to anything that came in upon it from the unseen physical world rolling away from the door. She imagined so much of his thought, standing there and listening to his recital. As she knew, he was always brooding. She didn't blame him. Some liberty to melancholy was due to a man who'd lost the eyes with which otherwise he'd have learnt to enjoy the world. He'd a right to think, if he wasn't allowed to see.

"I suppose I live for so long in a world of my own—the world of the blind man—that I take small stock of other men's worlds. When that there step come to the door I look up without caring who come. I say 'Yes.' And then a voice say:

'Beg pardon, sir. Wun'ful cold mornin', sir, for the time o' year!' "

Ezra went on to explain that while not being able to see his visitor and not knowing what it was all about, he concluded he was being asked for alms. He said he didn't know why he should be, seeing that he didn't look like a man able to bestow. But he might have added that, on the other hand, he'd no idea then of what was about to come to him in the way of an experience.

"Cauld? Whoi, yes. It's cauld for June."

He waited. He could hear the other moving his feet. There was the sound now also of something sniffing—a dog, evidently. The dog seemed to be sniffing behind him.

"You can keep the dog out o' my house."

"Yes, sir. Reckon that's easy. 'Ere, Luther!"

"What d'yer call 'im?"

"Luther. He wore give me by one of them there parsings!"

"Well, you take yer Luther outer this."

"Yes, sir. I suppose now, sir, you don't feel as if you could spare a copper or so to git a bit o' food? A man that 'ave a 'andicap don't live like other men."

Ezra paused in this recital of another man's words.

"It wore now," he said, "that I git a shock. He say, 'As you'll 'ave seen by this, I'm blind.' And he go on 'Unless you 'ad somebody loike that in yer family you got no idea 'ow it 'old a man up,

being blind. You may think you know, mister. But you don't.'

"I look at 'im 'ard and I say, '*Don't I?*' I tell you, my dear, I was holly stammed."

But she gathered that the situation, in its own queer way, delighted him. The irony was something that must have appealed to his palate as nothing had done for months. The beggar seemed to have gone on with lowering confidence but quite without understanding: " 'Well, in course you *might* know a bit of what it mean. You sound wun'ful sympathetic loike. But a whole heap o' sympathy don't go far. Heap o' good it is to a man that starve. I can't see you but you can see me and you can see that I ain't a man that say he want help when he don't want help. You look at me praper, mister, and you'll see.' "

Ezra paused. "Yes. I wore still holly stammed. So I never tell him! I put my hand in my pocket. I could feel him listen for the chink o' money. Reckon I know how it feel to make yer ears do the work o' yer eyes. Well, I say 'I can't give you much.' 'Anything, mister,' he say. 'Reckon anything 'elp from a tanner up——' "

"He wore asking anyways!" said Diana. "Got a bit o' cheek."

"Oh, I don't blame him a heap! I say 'A tanner? It'll be a bob or a ha'penny.' 'What you mane, mister, by that? Huh! You trying to feel what you bring up? But you'll see when you git

him in yer 'and. And you won't give a man that's blind a ha'penny so 'e think it's a bob, mister. Not that'— he sound threatening for a minute—'not that I don't reckon to know by feel. If you were blind, mister, you'd know a bob from a ha'penny as in the old days we knew a thick 'un from a tanner. You git wun'ful quick at feel when yer blind.' 'Do you now?' I say. You can reckon what I feel! 'Yes, you do!' "

"But was he—was he blind a long time?" Diana asked.

"I'm coming to that. I ask him that very question. He say 'A long time? Reckon donkeys' 'ears. From birth reely. Never reely seen nawthen. You don't know what it mane, mister!' He began to whine now. He think he got a new line on me. 'You don't know what it mane, mister, to 'ear them there birdses (*his* word) and not never see 'em. And them trees and flowers'—he talk praper common, it wore all '*them*' this and '*them*' that—'you only touch flowers and then try and think what they dew be. No, reckon you don't know what it mane *never* to have seen nawthen.' And I say true when I say to him: 'No, I don't know that. And here's a bob. No, it seem loike two bob. But you better have it! You give me a funny idea, bor,' I say."

Ezra said that the beggar now sprang "up into himself." No cringing, now that the two bob wore in his fingers!

" 'Give you an idea, do I?' he say. 'Glad to hear that, mister! It dew be rale good o' you to help a man loike that. Folk think that a man that's blind like being blind so he can go beggin'. Let 'em try being blind for a day, that's all. It shut you in——'

" 'Yes,' I say. 'It shut you in!' It seem funny to me but I didn't reckon to be swep' off into his way o' thinking, to go on like that.

"He say, 'It cut you off from a heap o' things that a man do.' He say, 'You never see a road you walk . . . you never see a woman.'

"And I say, 'You never see a road you walk, and, well——' "

"Yes," cried Diana eagerly, "what did you say then?"

" I say what he'd said. 'You never see a woman.' "

The voice of Ezra came low, thick and mysterious, as she imagined it must have sounded in the ear of the blind man. She found herself shuddering like a person suddenly flung into a place of darkness and terror. She looked at Ezra. He was telling her the story now with a very curious absorption. He made it appear as if something in his voice addressing the beggar had caught that weird visitor and troubled him.

" ' 'Ere—you, mister. What for you talkin' loike that—sayin' after me what I'm tellin *you* . . .'

" 'You got yer money . . .' I say. 'You git off. But when you go, when you git to the bottom o' the lane, you say to yerself, bor, I ain't the only

blind feller that ever happen. There's others. I may have been talking to one!' That made him jump. 'Eh?' he say."

But it seemed that the beggar, moved possibly by the authority of his benefactor, had already turned and begun to tap his way along the edge of the fence to the gate and to the path beyond. He seemed to the listening Ezra to go as if silenced "and skeered. I reckon he wasn't sorry when the gate swing behind him and he was off with his tyke behind! He go off with the wind up. I don't think he go near yours. Skeered. . . . Well," added Ezra oddly, "*I* wore skeered; skeered o' him."

II

Ezra told her that when his visitor had gone he sat on thinking. "Now I always reckon that I never pity myself. I laugh at myself when I do anything. But I git a new idea from that man. And the more I think about it, the bigger it git. That man that go away was a blind man like myself. But—and it's that that make the difference—he wore blind from birth. So I begin thinking: what was the world like to a chap that never see it—ever? I know what you mean when you say here's a flower or a house: or there's a starling, or yonders a yawl. I'd seen all them. But this man—*never* see them. Now what's a flower to a chap that never see a flower? And—and I think this. . . . What's a woman to a man that

never see a woman—that never *did* see a woman!"

Diana started. She stood staring at him. She thought, if he had never seen a woman, would her position in relation to him have been surer? But just now she was thinking of an amendment to his way of putting it: "What's a woman . . . to a man that see other women but that don't see *her*?" She said the words before she knew she'd said them.

Ezra drew a long breath. He was plainly moved: no longer reflecting upon the strangeness of his late experience but thrust into the tenser atmosphere of the moment that had its origin in the mind and speech of Diana. Never had her voice had more depth, colour or feeling.

"Yes . . . I know!" he said at last. "I know. Well, the woman that I can't see, I *can* see! A praper fine young mawther that make life different—blind or no blind."

"You mean that?" She hovered over him now, her eyes shining. She thought he would put out his arms to take her, but he did not. He seemed to be forcing himself back into that mood of speculation which had earlier controlled him: as if he feared the emotions being stirred in them both.

"What I'm thinking," he declared firmly, thrusting her back with himself into speculation, "is this, I lose my sight because something happen that needn't have happened——"

"A lot of soldiers needn't have been killed—needn't have been soldiers for that matter! Only

they happen to be brave men——"

"Oh, aye!" with a touch of impatience. "But let's git back to the man. He wore born blind. I don't say it wore his parents' doing. Well, he wore taught to talk, but they couldn't teach him to see a thing. He see nawthen—not even his dog." He paused: he seemed to find this statement interesting. "It not as if a man come to me and say he see a new animal in the Zoo. I could follow him whatever he say. If he say it's got a neck three times as long as a donkey and it's yellow with black stripes I could in a kind o' way see the thing and say what you're talking about's called a giraffe. But if a feller's never seen a donkey there'd be no good in saying the neck of this animal was three times as long as a donkey's. And, look here—what do red mean to a blind man that never all his life see colour, let alone see red? That blind feller that was blind from the start, couldn't begin to know what I know—not much, he couldn't! If he sit in the sun and it make him warm and comfortable and people say that's the sun, I expect all he know about the sun is that it stand for the thing that warm you up. Now *I* think the sun happen to be something I know. Even when he don't show, I know he hang there. Like your brother, if you got one, that come into the room when its dark and you begin to talk to him. You can't see him but you know he come in and what exactly he look like in the light. But the other fellow that's blind

just hear a voice. He see nawthen. The man that come in just be a voice."

He sighed, but with a queer complacency. It seemed to Diana that the blind beggar had not passed to no purpose. He had left behind a subtle and extraordinary mental stimulant in the thought that one man's state of misfortune can be worse than another's.

Ezra, the man who had lost his sight in manhood, sat staring in growing fascination at the thought of the man blind from birth. She thought his mind hovered over the blind beggar constantly and with immense play of imagination. She did not try to draw him forward again into the field of those emotions that had disturbed them both.

When she could she crept away.

CHAPTER XI

DIANA continued full of fears, she who in other days feared neither man nor thunder nor trouble. She dreaded the approach of spies, of women and of the Unknown—of the Unknown most of all. Every hour of her happiness was, as she recognised, stolen. She enjoyed what she'd no right to enjoy. She could not complain if fate tricked her as she'd tricked the fate that had brought this man into her life. But she had begun to meditate a new line of action: sometimes she halted in her consideration of it and was ready to retreat. But her boldness recovered and then enlarged itself. One of these days the deed which, once, she would not have dared . . . she'd do.

In the meantime she thought of her present enemies—spies, women and the Unknown. She could deal with spies: Tubb's sly eyes avoided her these days, and she never caught him near their door now: he'd had *his* lesson. She regarded women resolutely: she'd beat them: hadn't she beaten Doris, a pretty enough piece and bold enough? And couldn't she rely on herself to beat any others?

She'd come in from the yard, breathing hard, stamping with her "land girl" boots, while straw

and dung fell away from the thick soles, and look round, scenting enemies.

But she'd stop and quail when the thought of that other, always unpredicated danger, rose in her mind. She'd find herself like a traveller who suddenly sees a chasm under his feet.

A new danger did appear, though in the first moment she took it more coolly than when she'd had time to reflect. It was signified in the word braille. The danger had once been hinted, no more: now it revealed itself.

She knew he'd not learnt to read by touch. He'd said "I never learn praperly. Reckon they try to teach me. I learnt a word here or there. But I never was one for books."

"Reckon you wore lazy." She'd told him that before, but not to stir him to amend. This "laziness" had always had her approval. If he couldn't read by touch he'd depend the more on her. And so she continued to read, using her beautiful voice as effectively as possible. She knew now what he liked to hear, and what he did not like. National affairs, politics, war, he rejected: football, reports of royalty, he approved. But she had the comforting thought always that some of his choices were the result of his earlier expressed dislike of hearing a "young mawther" like herself reading about violence. "Nawthen o' that—from you."

In line with this was his odd readiness for a sentimental love story. Their daily paper, which

was impressively popular in tone, ran a competition at one time on "My Own Romance." Each day, as there appeared the engaging confessions of the little men and women from the suburbs of all the cities of Great Britain, he listened eagerly. "That's a good one," was the most he'd say. But as long as the competition lasted he demanded to hear. She recognised now that he had abandoned all effort to read. The days passed. His dependence grew. She told herself that it must soon reach a condition when, whatever he knew of her, he could not do without her.

And then, coming in one day, she heard, with sudden new fear, that he'd had a visit—from a woman. Not a woman to be feared directly. The woman was again Mrs. Ashplant. But a woman in whose hands were gifts to be indeed looked at —by herself at least—with suspicion. She had always feared this intervention since he'd told her of his first meeting with Mrs. Ashplant.

The report he gave her now with as much detail as he could manage, was of a visit that began with a hesitating knock and a voice saying:

" 'I was told you were here.' "

Ezra said that his answer was, "Yes, madam!"

" 'I told you I was coming to see you, didn't I? And now I've come. D'you remember I said I was a member of the group of people who do braille work. I help to translate the new books, you know!' "

" 'Very good of you, madam,' " said Ezra.

"I wore thinking what dew she want *me* to say or do exactly," Ezra added to Diana.

" 'Knowing that you were still here, I thought that you might like some books—' she say.

"I tell her that I wasn't any good at that touch reading. She say she know—I'd told her that before. But she say I could still learn.

" 'But,' I say, ' you see, madam, as it is I'm read to so much that——'

" 'Oh? You are read to, are you? Who read to you?'

" 'A young lady they call Miss Cliss come here.' "

Diana started. "You said *that*?" She looked round the room with suspicion, as if she'd find that from behind the shadows some power was dragging him away from her. What did that Mrs. Ashplant know or suspect? Anything? Was her call mere kindness? Suppose the woman had, in fact, told him? Diana paused, waiting to put her challenge.

"Did she say anything—about *me*?"

"She say it wore rale good of you to read to me such a heap."

"That was all?"

"Oh, she seem amused because I call you a young lady."

Diana felt a touch as of an icy hand. So he had been told: she must go through with it now!

"What did she mean by that?"

"Oh, I reckon she think a young woman hadn't no right to be a young lady."

Diana heaved a sudden sigh, almost an exclamation of relief. But these moments were coming to be very dearly bought.

It did not occur to Diana that, to Mrs. Ashplant, the allusion might have seemed a charming politeness, not calling for challenge, or that the "young lady" allusion had really rather delighted her.

"What else she say?"

"She ask what you read to me. And I say the news. And she say there wore a lot of books to read—new books—if I learnt to read praper."

"I suppose you—you said you didn't want to learn."

"Well, I did say that. But she take no denial. She bring the machine. She expect me to learn." He laughed drearily. "I expect I better learn."

She understood. He'd been persuaded. Probably he had always been a little ashamed that he could do so much less than other men in his condition. Or . . . was he less anxious than he had been to hear her read? The thought stabbed her to speech.

"You'll do without me reading then?" she said casually.

"Reckon I'll need to trouble you less. But I expect I'll want to hear your voice just the same."

She discovered presently that he was working

quite hard on the braille. She knew each time that Mrs. Ashplant had been visiting him. When Diana came in after such a visit she'd find him working with real application.

She entered his cottage one day and looked across with conscious distaste at the book on his knees.

"Oh, you're reading?" She didn't try to disguise her dislike for this effort of his.

"You don't seem very pleased," he said and laughed. "Reckon I git sick o' it myself. But she come in and come over me with her—her kind talk and things and I promise I'll go on——"

"Her kind talk?"

"Well, she have a way with her that she can't help, I suppose. She come close. She have soft hands when she show you how to read. She's a lot older than you, I reckon, but I reckon she got her own way of gitting a thing done."

Diana bit her lip hard. She must say nothing, nothing. She must come in on Mrs. Ashplant next time. And yet she knew she dared not. If she did, the woman, speaking a careless word to her, might destroy all. And there was satisfaction in the thought that Mrs. Ashplant's exalted and indifferent attitude to the blind man constituted no danger to herself. On the other hand, the lady's determination that Ezra should learn to read meant that she would keep him occupied and to some extent under surveillance, so that he

would be the less in danger from casual mawthers. Disapproving his braille, she yet watched his progress because she watched everything that he did. She saw that he had at last begun to read as if he was forgetting that he was employing a novel device. The daily experience was ceasing to be conscious. She thought that he had stopped thinking "Here am I, *touching*." Now, turning a page, he thought, "Here am I, *reading*."

Yes, at last he was reading as a man with sight reads—because there is something in the printed page that he wants to know. He'd begun to love this braille—as blind men have the best cause to do.

She thought he had long had more facility than he had admitted to her. But now he read books.

Watching him, Diana saw that books were taking a place in his mind. Ideas, scenes, human figures, were rising out of the dark and comforting him with their prevailing and infectious vigour. She did not forget that he "wasn't a scholar." Normally he would not have been a reader. But with many hours a day on his hands he was having the experience of thousands of men in his condition: he was being led into a path where he could be provided with compensations for the loss of the enjoyment of visual beauty and, having at last consented to be thus led, he was now inclined to press forward on his own initiative. It had been a steep path, but he could climb it now.

She thought that he was finding himself in contact with people out of the books. Very likely for him they were infinitely more alive than they'd ever been in the printed page, coming up, as they did now, through his fingers and standing vital and magnificently three-dimensional—"all solid," she called it—before his mind's eye.

Sometimes he dropped a word that gave her an idea of his attitude. Yet she would not lose heart altogether. If he gained a sort of independence of her, it was not complete. One day he owned as much.

"It'll take me a long time before I can read that easy that it don't seem like work."

On the other hand, she continued to distrust every device that, in any way, reduced his reliance on her. Because she feared, she hated—not braille but the fact that he was mastering braille. She knew she was selfish. She convicted herself daily, and with scarcely any shame, of the grossest selfishness. But she retorted upon herself: what other woman was in her grotesque situation? What was selfishness where motives were all of the highwayman-thief variety? When you adventured all, you didn't pause to ask am I, in details, showing selfishness?

And yet she continued to be haunted by grim fears, spiritual as well as physical. What were the words that had sprung out at her from her calendar, telling her that she might not be inhabited by

her own soul but be a wretched creature burdened with the soul of another because unfitted to carry a soul of her own? She blamed herself angrily for submitting to such fears: she had once been free from fancies: her imagination she could once have guaranteed to be perfectly under control. Why was she so easily haunted by terrors to-day?

She knew why. She was living in a pretence. She was wicked, a deceiver.

But, in the meantime, her fears of physical interference did not abate. Braille was an enemy to be dreaded.

She did not forget that the collapse of all her hopes of the picture fetching a high price brought daily nearer Westerby's eviction and her consequent separation from Ezra—probably for ever, since in any more crowded situation the truth must reach him at once.

But if Diana saw braille—that greatest of all blessings to the blind—as her immediate enemy, happily for her peace of mind she failed to remember that there was another contrivance of human ingenuity that could be put at the service of a blind man to give him independence.

II

But that other device was now to be introduced. If it was to make reading of less importance, it was not to help her much in other ways. As to its

character, though he'd heard of it, he'd made no suggestion that it should be brought to serve him.

It was possible that he'd heard that blind men's hospitals and blind men's centres had got the boon: and that it was to be extended to individual cases. But he'd not said anything.

He'd got to know Mrs. Ashplant's bird-like quickness. He told Diana that though this visitor was older than herself, his thoughts of her sometimes puzzled him.

"She was here to-day. She seem young, somehow."

"Well, she *is* young—young enough." It was grudging but honest.

"Is she now? But she seem younger than young women—she *seem* younger sometimes than a mawther like you."

"Well," was this a concession to an honesty remote indeed?—"in some ways she *is* younger. She not have a heap o' things to look after like what I have."

With a laugh.

He hadn't understood. But he said: "Oh, it's all right. I loike a woman of that sort to seem young. But I'd rather that you, being just a young mawther, seem old!"

"You—you mean that?"

He didn't understand the odd, choking eagerness.

"Yes, I mean that—I think."

She must be content with that, down to the mysterious qualification.

She was now to hear more about Mrs. Ashplant's visit.

" 'Here I am,' she say. 'How is the reading gitting on? I must send you some new books.' I say to that, 'Thank you very much, very pleased I'm sure.' But she say, 'Yes, but I've got something else. Come to tell you. Not a book. But we're getting a new wireless set and so you could have our old one. It's quite a nice one——' I say, 'That's very good of you, madam,' and she say, 'Well, when it come, you'll know what it is. The man that bring it will fix up the aerial.' So braille don't be enough. They do a lot for men like me—though I notice they don't give you your sight. But I got wireless now. She give me wireless."

In Diana there had been growing a new, sick fear. Oh no, this was not nor would be in the case of anyone else, a tragedy. But anything was potentially a tragedy for her that increased his independence of her. For his dependence was something much more subtle than a mere physical thing: he didn't merely look to her for food and to put his room to rights or see that he had clean things each week. To maintain his interest in her, she must be significant to his mind and she must have constant excuses for being very near to him.

He read to himself now and that reduced his claim on her: but reading was, after all, an effort,

and he had had to depend on her for the news. Whereas listening to wireless was a simple and passive experience and gave him all the news he needed. It was sometimes also an emotional experience. The music he would hear would stir him —since it stirred men of every sort and education.

So that the situation continued increasingly dangerous. The need for some new decisive action on her part became clearer than ever.

She knew what that action must be. Once, as she felt sure, she would not have had the boldness to dare: desperate to-day, that boldness had become hers.

CHAPTER XII

Diana knew well what she now intended. The action was forced upon her. She thought how she had held up the world so that she might keep Ezra a little longer. She had held up Westerby; the sneak, Peeping-Tom Tubb; Doris; Mr. Ashplant. . . . She could not hold them for ever. She must dare everything to make Ezra her own. She must . . . marry him. She stared at the word as if it was painted in great letters before her eyes:

MARRY

And once she'd not have dared to think of such a thing: she would merely have looked past the idea: she had been content to live in an impossible dimension from day to day. Love was enough. But love, she began to find, was not enough. Love! She wanted the free, robust love that went with marriage. In the meantime her confirmed maidenliness on the one hand, her fear of unconscious betrayal of the truth and of herself by herself on the other, made her keep out of his close hold.

When she sat "agin him" she tried to relax in order to disguise the power and even splendour of her masculine figure. How often when she was

tempted to let him draw her close, did she remember that light word of his—did *he* remember it?—she hoped he'd forgotten. . . . "You got fine powerful arms—you must be a fine big figure for a mawther!" The praise hadn't been grateful. She had evaded him more than ever after that.

She knew how she desired his embraces. But she must not enjoy them. At all costs she must hold him away until she had him for her own. He must long for her and go on longing until his love was something independent of and indifferent to a knowledge of the mere physical facts and was something alive in its own dimension. But he must meet no other woman in the meantime: and the world must know nothing of any part of her hopes and plans.

Did ever woman encounter such a situation as she did?—a situation that existed in a trembling Present only—a situation that called for all her invention, determination and coolness.

She could sometimes take a moment to be astonished by her development of those characteristics so necessary for the success of her enterprise. Enterprise? Yes—the enterprise of a woman, of a woman making her last throw for love! Was there nothing deserving of sympathy in her action? Did she not need love as much as those feather-headed young girls with thoughts only of boys that could take them out bare-legged and riding pillion?

Hadn't she the *right* to love?

She hadn't sought the love that had come to her! If it had come in a way that derided her, it had come; and she had seized her chance. And out of nothing she had fashioned romance.

If Love left her now, she could not bear it. She knew herself for the weak woman she was in such a matter as this. But what did the young and foolish, whose prerogative Love was supposed to be, know of the heart of a woman in middle life? Was it ignoble to desire to prove your womanhood? Was it wrong if you saw in marriage that proof established? Why did one see so many women in the middle years take any man that came rather than take none? But she was not wholly as they! No. She had been content to live her own life—until this chance was forced upon her! Should she refuse to take what offered?

II

The curious thing about Diana was that she was usually quite successful in prosecuting her designs even when they were sentimental. She so controlled sentiment in the interest of sentiment that she achieved victories in the most business-like way. She had now to execute the most delicate of all enterprises.

She had to propose marriage to her man, and propose it for a fixed day, just as he had, by impli-

cation, proposed it for some romantic and still shadowy future.

But this was not the only consideration that made her grave and silent even when she came in upon her lover—as, in secret, she delighted to call him. And why not? Was he not hers? Was not their relation almost a relation between normal lovers, lovers building their romance on sure foundations of time and place? Let the world laugh at a woman who loved a man half her age and who held his love merely because he had no eyes to see her. Let it laugh! She'd still hold him! She asked for neither sympathy nor support. If the whole thing was pitiable because as futile as absurd, she refused pity. She stood four-square to the world, gave it back the derision it suspended over or discharged upon her head.

She made her plans with a cool mind. She knew that in the ordinary course, a couple proposing to marry had to give notice, and that the notice having been given, it must be proclaimed in church for three Sundays. But if marriage was noised about, Ezra would be visited by friends who would expose the truth and deride the intending bride. In spite of the calm with which she made her plans, she paused sometimes, startled by the thought of her own daring—and wickedness. It was the realisation of the wickedness that made her pause. For what she proposed *was* wicked. She was again the victim of her fearful remembrance

of the words that had leapt at her from her calendar:

> For who is sure he hath a Soule, unlesse
> It see, and judge, and follow worthinesse,
> And by Deedes praise it? hee who doth not this,
> May lodge an In-mate soule, but 'tis not his.

So often did she go back to these lines that she began to reinterpret them. "Unless it see." Did *she* see? And was her fate presently to be that of the people of whom it was spoken "that they which see might be made blind." If you saw what you ought and ought not to do, and did what you ought not and refused to do what you ought, your sight would be taken from you. Was she already losing her sight? Was it not true that there had been a time when she had only contemplated a day's enjoyment of Ezra's error? Certainly she had had no idea of making him link himself to her. *She* had had no idea—but who, to-day, was she? Had another soul indeed entered her body to inhabit it?

But by now, as she knew, she was helpless. Whoever "the soule" that now occupied her might be, it was intent upon one thing—total and permanent possession of this blind man. She knew that she must go on with her plans grimly and without a pause.

She had made secret enquiries, but had confined them to Gippeswyk. She drew relief from the thought that she need not be married in a church. She could not have borne that. Perhaps

that other "soule" that might once have been hers would rise up in the midst of the service to denounce a deception. If any of you know cause or just impediment. . . . Didn't she know—that other "soule"?

She must marry at once. She could do so with a special licence. To get this you were supposed to produce a special reason. But she could always say that the bridegroom was blind and that therefore they did not want the publicity of an ordinary wedding. She understood that the special reason wasn't really demanded. What was demanded was the fee. But the fee she knew she'd provide with a laugh.

She decided to do all: to have all ready—even to the ring! She started at the thought of that. But yes, it should be got. She had a curious, half-fearful and fatalistic thought. Even if, at the last, her romance failed her, there'd be a ring!

But first she must fix a date. *She* must—though after all it was the bride's privilege. Suddenly she remembered that! Like all middle-aged women in love, she was far better acquainted with the traditions of marriage than many girls beginning early to taste romance.

Diana planned, with great preliminary care, the talk she must have with Ezra.

She must be brief: there must be just time for him to consent to something: not time enough for him to reconsider things. She had begun to

fear that ruminating mind of his, so active behind the dead eyes.

She came in upon him, bright and smiling. A pose! Inwardly she trembled. But at least he couldn't see her weakness.

"Well, dear?" She still found it hard to use words of love.

When Ezra chose to do so, which was not often, he managed them much more easily than she did.

"Well?" He smiled. There was no excitement in his voice. She eyed him quickly and anxiously. She knew his every mood. She saw that to-day his mind was at ease. She could talk: she had liberty of access to him.

"I came to talk about something, Ezra, dear."

"Yes, my dear. Say on. Reckon I hear and am always glad to hear——"

"Are you, indeed? Are you glad, Ezra?"

"Oh, aye! I'm glad to hear."

"It seem to me that the time come to talk."

"Well, *you* talk, my dear. Your job, I reckon. It look as if somebody got to tell me things sometimes. And you fare to take a man in hand wun'ful!"

She started. This ascription to her of such mature powers of correction—to what might it lead? She turned white and held a chair as he went on.

"You do be a praper mother to me. There do be times when I'd say you weren't a girl at

all"—and he laughed—"when you talk loike a woman twice my age. It always amuse a man when a young girl come to him and talk like that. Of course it do."

She drew a deep breath, but she succeeded in controlling her voice as she said: "Well, then! This old woman"—he chuckled—"this old woman think that, as she grow so old, it do be time for something to happen—happen between us. You —you *do* want that?" She couldn't keep the plea out of her voice—the plea for warm and immediate proclamation of the need he felt to have her for his own, sealed to him for ever.

He moved his position very slowly, and as it seemed to her warily: he settled himself back before he answered. But when he spoke his voice was the voice of the lover—her lover.

"Yes, my dear. Yes. Of course I want . . . *that*! I think once that things could go on a long time loike this here. Just having each other—an hour now and then. But I see that if my uncle don't try to stop us——"

"Your uncle needn't know nawthen! Anyhow he wouldn't mind! He know very well he'd be nowhere without me. But"—with a setting of her lips—"we need never be skeered o' your uncle! I can manage your uncle—and he know it."

Ezra laughed. She knew he didn't understand her. She did not explain.

"Then, dear—you'd loike me"—she paused, as

if she watched each step—"to make the arrangements?"

"Why, yes!"

"I thought we would do things very quiet. Not tell a heap o' folks. We needn't really tell a soul. It don't be needful."

He hesitated, said carelessly "There's banns, and things . . ." and laughed.

She was not sure that he was now keeping the whole thing tentative and outside the scope of immediate action. She did not, because she dare not, challenge him. She said calmly "All that can be managed! There's other things!"

"What things?"

"Well, there's the ring."

"Well, my dear, you buy that too."

She had hoped he'd have demanded to buy that. But she saw that wisdom would demand that he should not be seen with her, hunting jewellers' shops in Gippeswyk.

Yet she would have liked it if he'd . . .

But at last she got his consent. She did not know that he had fully understood the scope of her demand for action. She wasn't sure that he even realised that he was agreeing to immediate action of a radical kind—the kind that would change his life for ever.

She knew she had won what she wanted: consent to go forward.

CHAPTER XIII

Full of her purpose Diana rose next morning. It was understood that once a week she went to Gippeswyk for business or shopping as she chose, and with no preliminary announcement of her intentions. Thus she knew she would stir no curiosity if she went on the regular day, Wednesday, even though there was little or no actual business to do. What little the farm produced they were able to dispose of in Drowning Marsh and district.

She had considered modifying her dress to her new feminine standards: but not from a motive of masculine firmness but from that of a woman's new consciousness of herself, she shrank from anything that would cause comment.

"Hello, there go Diana Cliss. Doll herself up wun'ful!" Talk of that kind—even the thought that it might be possible—would be intolerable to-day.

She put on the rough, soiled, tweed coat and skirt that she'd not worn for a month past. She came downstairs: on an impulse she glanced at the calendar:

> Truth a rare flower now is growne,
> Few men wear it in their hearts;

Lovers are more easily knowne
By their follies, then deserts.

She turned away quickly. Truth . . . a rare flower. Who was this Campion? These men, who couldn't spell, wrote these things to trouble people born after they were dead!

She hardened her heart, strode out and luckily caught sight of Tubb. She could be as grim as she chose. Bluntly, she gave him her commands. He was not to forget that order for the new people. "Havenworths agin the vicarage. A quart. Afternoon!"

He answered "Aye."

She frowned. Though her mood had been sentimental, she was prepared to put all sentiment aside to deal with Tubb or his kind at any moment. There was Diana's strength! But a glance at Tubb reassured her. He had not forgotten the lesson she'd given him. If ever he did forget. . . .

She hesitated as she came to Ezra's door. She had meant to call. Then, in sudden knowledge that Tubb was near, she'd determined to pass. And now in third mood—that comes so often when we change a plan because of consciousness of another person—she suddenly resolved to be free of others prying. Let anybody spy, peep or pry!

She opened the door. Ezra was sitting, as he often did, in his carpet-backed chair—the old chair she'd taken from his uncle. As soon as he

heard her approach his chin shot up: blind men push the head back to "see" who comes. Ezra knew who came but he probably had an idea of some special excitement.

It struck Diana that she found words hard to come by. She was actually hesitating, temporising.

"How are you, Ezra dear, this mornin'——"

"Oh, fair waxed, but keep a doin', as we say."

"You needn't pick up what another man say, to answer me."

"Sorry!" He seemed to be choosing his words now. "You going off somewhere?"

"I reckon you know where I'm going. I tell you yesterday."

"Oh, aye. You going to Gippeswyk."

"Yes. And you know why, Ezra dear! So don't you pretend."

She spoke sharply and noticed that she did. She knew what was in her mind. *He*'d not asked to come too. She was not hoping that he would show a desire to give his company: what she wished was that he had wanted, and wanted badly, to do what she was going to do when, at last, she did reach the big town. She was to be a deputy: and here was the principal!

But he made no attempt even to rise, let alone to demand a place in the expedition.

"Well, good-bye, my dear!" he said.

She paused. That was a sort of dismissal. She took a pace towards him, and then stood back to

examine his face. If there was an incipient quivering in the muscles of her throat and mouth, she checked it sternly and said lightly enough:

"You *want* me to git it, don't you?"

"Oh, aye. If you mane *it*! It wait in the shop, I suppose, for you to git it."

He laughed. But now he was looking before him as if on some scene remote enough to be in another world.

Once or twice she had surprised him in these curious ruminations, as if the world he knew had receded, drawing his mind and imagination after it.

"It seem funny . . . that *I* should be gitting it. A thing that now you'll never git: not in your life, you won't!"

He seemed to consider these words, though from the view-point of a man far away still. Certainly they did not stir him to action. But he sought to bring the talk to an end and to send her on her way.

"Good-bye, my dear. Good-bye. And see you git the right size!"

She had been about to retreat. But now she blushed suddenly and, taking a light step forward, bent and kissed his sightless eyes. She often kissed him there since the day when she'd first done it, and he'd said: "You sort o' heal them."

She didn't speak now. Having kissed, she turned and went out. Nor far from the door stood

Tom Tubb. If he grinned, his grin was so furtive that she didn't catch him at it.

She strode on into the morning.

Diana looked about her. Without being troubled she was not perfectly sure of her happiness to-day. Ezra was probably just tired. He had admitted that he'd often been tired of late. Also a man could not always be at a white heat of passion and excitement. He had told her this one day with such an odd air of certainty that she accused him, with a laugh, of arguing from experience. He'd chosen to take her charge seriously, though answering with the question "Who teach me these things? Who, if not yourself?"

She had left him and come away still uncertain: she had of late discovered remotenesses in his character which she found it hard to approach, feeling as one might do who looks to mountain peaks from the plain when mists part overhead.

She came away uncertain again to-day. But as she looked about her, her concern began to pass. Diana had found that since love came to her the landscape, once so familiar as to be ignored, had developed powers of healing, aid and comfort. So much so that she often left it to the scene about her to interpret her experiences to her confused mind and heart.

The wide, green expanse of the fields, interrupted here and there by a late-bearing loam, the passages of red crag that added a mild excitement to the

landscape, the block of elms standing up with such an air of generosity to the general scene (as if they were there to confer solidity to the picture—sadly vulnerable though they themselves might be), and the far, blue hills with the pale blue of the river caught between the green of trees—all combined in an effect that was aerial and to her mind, stimulating. It did not tell her that love is its own reward, that not even love, suffering a check, is materially deprived. Its message was not explicit. It is that only to particularly sensitised minds, to the intellect unfortunate and sophisticated enough to entertain doubts and hesitations at the same time that it accepts support. The peasant—and Diana was merely a peasant of somewhat more than normally heroic stature—experiences Nature and Nature's message subconsciously. He laughs when Nature smiles: and if he is mildly troubled and Nature is smiling, he decides that Nature is probably right. Deep trouble in his heart is another matter altogether: for then it is that he cries out in the sharp remonstrance to which his agony drives him: "O whist, O whist, ye bonnie bird."

But always he has his own way of dealing with Nature.

Diana drove her hard-worn Ford over the narrow road that, having been lately re-tarred and given a top dressing of crag, looked like a bright-red carpet. The brilliance of its colour made it shrink to the appearance of a path. She tried to

import the glow into her heart. She was resolved to rejoice.

But immediately her joy turned to shy fears—sweet enough fears; but she'd be glad when she was in the car again and on her way home.

II

Diana stood outside Walbers, the jewellers, for five minutes, looking at the rings and watches and chains and bracelets and "souvenirs" displayed in the purple velvet frames. There was one tiara. She'd never known how to pronounce the word, and in her own circles the difficulty was got over by a perversion so deliberate as to make obvious the fact that you called it ta-ra-ra from a desire to be funny. The tiara was an ornament "worn by duchesses and such like with bare necks." It wasn't for her. But if she didn't want a tiara, neither did she require a gold bracelet with green stones, nor a diamond locket, nor yet a ring set with three brilliants that caused the sunlight touching it to turn it into all the colours she could think of.

She only wanted one thing—a plain gold band—a wedding ring.

She knew she would have liked it if Ezra'd said you must take me to Gippeswyk and guide me to the door of Walbers and leave me to buy the ring: but he'd not said so. True, he might have had the

idea that it would be impossible for her to guide him and at the same time maintain her mysterious order that he must never ask to go out and be seen in her company. But she wished that on this occasion he had rebelled. . . . He hadn't rebelled. He'd let her go to Gippeswyk. He'd left it to her to buy the ring.

She still hesitated. Then a glimpse of Mrs. Peel and Mrs. Mallison up from Drowning Marsh, a pair that swept through the shops on a railway cheap day, like twin flames of desire, made her move—though not before the women were upon her.

"Whoi it do be Miss Cliss! Reckon I never see yew afore lookin' into a shop with a heap o' vanities loike that! I wore holly stammed! I say to Mrs. Peel—it can't be Miss Cliss, though it's wun'ful loike her, and Mrs. Peel say it can't be, but it is."

Diana looked about her for escape. Her heart was surging with anger. But she was too shrewd to let a shadow show in her face. Give these women the smallest chance . . . She smiled sweetly.

"I come so rare. I got to see all there is!"

"And I don't blame you," said the lean Mrs. Peel. "If I come as little as you *I'd* look round. I say to Mrs. Mallison don't you do too much. You remember you got a heart——"

"I reckon I can do what others do!" resentfully put in the rubicund and puffing woman named. Diana laughed: she was recovering: she knew the

ways of this pair. When frail, thin Mrs. Peel had begun to tire, as she did easily, she spent the consequent nervous irritation on her friend, whose inexhaustible forces had such an air of impropriety.

"What you both want," said Diana, "is a nice cup o' tea."

"And that's what we git as soon as we done Woolworths," said Mrs. Mallison.

"And you'll need it by then. Not sure you don't need it now, my dear!" came from Mrs. Peel, as the pair trundled on.

Diana waited till they had disappeared round the corner into the thoroughfare that was graced and illuminated by the shop front of Woolworths—a house which has probably given more pleasure to poor people than any other institution in the world. Then swiftly she turned and, taking a dozen steps in retreat, darted into Walbers.

In the welcome dimness she looked about her. She was remembering the advertisement of another and larger firm, one she knew very well and that had hung for years in the stations of Gippeswyk and neighbourhood—a legend painted in enamel on iron hoardings:

"My grandmother's wedding-ring was bought at Smith's in 1875.
My mother's wedding-ring was bought at Smith's in 1905.
My own ring was bought at Smith's in ——"

Smith's, the oldest and most experienced shop in the town, gave you thirty years between weddings. If you were born, say, two to five years after your parents' marriage, you should be somewhere between twenty-five and twenty-eight when you were married yourself.

What were the ideas of the assistants at the less experienced Walbers, who were now looking across at her?

They'd have no expectation of what was coming from her lips! Of that she could feel sure. She trembled. She who could walk boldly into a group of truculent labourers and give them a sharp order, who was respected and even feared in the Gippeswyk market, not half a mile from this shop, for her firmness and masculine common sense, stood there abject and sick with terror. Yet she managed to approach a counter behind which a pleasant stout man, with dark hair swept back in wonderful waves and whose wife perhaps bought her wedding-ring in 1905, awaited her.

"Yes, madam? A ring? For yourself, madam? A diamond cluster—we have some most attractive designs—everything depends on the setting to-day—on its being up-to-date. Opinion changes about rings as fast as it does about clothes—among the ladies. He! He!"

"I didn't want a diamond ring," Diana said. *Was* her voice normal: was it merely her fancy that it was playing about in the ceiling?

"I see. You had in mind"— he took a furtive glance at her fingers. She hadn't taken her gloves off yet—"a signet ring? Married ladies take one for the little finger sometimes."

"No. And I'm *not* married." She spoke with sharp finality.

"I beg pardon, madam. Only trying to learn customers' wishes, you know ——"

"Quite so. What I want . . . For a lady I know who want it, is a wedding-ring."

The polite shopman seemed, so far as she could see from a hasty glance, to be elevating his eyebrows. But the brows were safely on the level again as he answered smoothly:

"Have you the size, madam?"

"Yes. Yes. That is I haven't got it—you loike it on one of those cut-out things, don't you? No. But I could . . . I could give you an idea. As a matter of fact my finger's her size. So——"

"Quite so, madam! Very lucky. Makes it easy. Let's hope it'll be a lucky wedding for your friend as well!"

To this more or less pious wish she offered no reply. She tried to scowl, but ended in a flush of colour. Was this horrid man laughing at her? Did he pierce the miserable subterfuge she was trying to work?

But at last he was turning to the shelf behind and withdrawing a tray, as if he did a commonplace of business. He then thrust the tray upon the

glass counter and with an encouraging "*Now*, madam!" began to draw out one or two rings.

"Allow *me*!"

She had by this removed a glove. She hadn't noticed in her nervous absorption that she'd taken off the right glove.

"*Not* the left?" said the man, "usually it's the left—even for trying on, you know, madam. Though we did have a lady here only last week who'd got rheumatism in her left hand—it wasn't a wedding-ring that time, though. Still, we like ——"

"Try *this*!" put in Diana shortly, thrusting forward her firm left hand and remembering to incline the third finger. The man did try. She thought he looked puzzled, but she was torn between two suspicions either of which would make her dislike him if proved to be well founded—he thought she was really acting for another since, obviously, she couldn't be getting married at her age: or she was an old maid "marrying on" to some ancient widower who merely wanted a housekeeper. She glared angrily as this thought occurred: and then collapsed again into self-conscious speech and uneasy laughter as she said: "This seem too tight! Wun'ful tight."

"Yes. It *is* too tight, much too tight. But I thought your young friend's finger might be a little thinner."

He coughed: he was really a kind person wish-

ing to be helpful as well as to do business satisfactorily for himself and the hidden and ultimate customer.

"You see, madam, many of our customers are not just—er—young ladies like yourself, but very young—mawthers as we call them in Suffolk. Just girls—scarcely out o' school."

It occurred to her suddenly that he was really trying to help! She grew calmer.

"Well, that one seem all right," she said suddenly, when seven rings had been tried. "How much?"

"You'll take it now, madam—or would your friend like to have anything inscribed inside—a date or anything?"

"Do—do people have dates?"

"Oh, frequently, madam. But not always."

"Then if it's not generally done I don't think I —she—bother. I'll take it now."

"Yes, madam. Thank you very much. It will be two guineas, please. Oh, and did you want a keeper?"

"A keeper?" Her head shot up angrily. Then she lowered it again quickly, having understood in time. She had known so little of jewellery! She'd never owned a ring in her life or bought one—and her mind was so full of nervous suspicions that for one moment the ludicrous thought had sprung that the man thought she should be put under restraint.

She laughed rather noisily at herself and then

blushed because she thought he might follow her thought and be amused. But he was perfectly grave now as he accepted her money and handed her the ring done up in a little cardboard box. (It occurred to her to wonder if *he'd* ever bought a wedding-ring.)

"Well, madam, if . . . if your friend should want any other article of jewellery or if you thought of giving her a wedding-present, we'd be very pleased indeed to submit articles for inspection. I suppose you *didn't* think of buying a nice present for the—the happy pair——"

"No! No, I hadn't. I hadn't thought. Good morning."

She went out very quickly. He'd get no more from her, whether orders or amusement.

CHAPTER XIV

The afternoon had been sultry. The blue sky that had arched Gippeswyk as Diana entered the town, was now becoming overcast with heavy slow-moving clouds, black and copper and grimly purposeful—copper seems to mark action in the sky as well as on the sea—action so violent and terrible that decks must be cleared and things put away. Just now there was a concentration of this fleet of clouds: nothing happened, but people looked up and made hasty, half-instinctive calculations about being within reach of shelter when the storm came. That it was to be a storm out of the ordinary there was nothing as yet to show. The cautious made their plans. Men and women, setting out, looked up and retreated for rainproofs, or postponed a journey. A few bold ones shrugged shoulders and went on.

Driving back to Drowning Marsh, Diana looked up at the gathering storm with the eye of a country woman. But she hoped she would be home before it broke. The thought surprised her as soon as she was conscious of it. There had been a time when storms neither impressed nor troubled her. She took them in her stride through life. Of late natural disturbances had begun to make her un-

easy: she did not enquire too closely why. But she knew to-day that she was relieved that the storm had still not burst as she approached Drowning Marsh. Leaving the main road, she entered the green lane with its long avenue of limes that hid the signs of the storm and provided a sense of sweet, green and slightly unreal silence. But Diana's first thought of Drowning Marsh was less of its quiet and greenness than of its impersonal attitude to herself. Once she had feared its coarse curiosity—now she felt that Gippeswyk was the inquisitor. It was not only the two local women but Gippeswyk that had seen her hesitate in the street outside; that, with inclination to be cruel, had watched her enter the jeweller's; that had seen her buy a ring for a wedding; that had laughed and winked at the question whose wedding; that had followed her, conscious as she was in every muscle, as she had escaped. Among the limes she had, momentarily, a sense of refuge—but of refuge only from her late preoccupation. As she came to the end of the avenue other thoughts began to trouble her. Diana was in that odd state when the mind is not only most vividly apprehensive, but finds itself unable to separate mental and spiritual from physical impressions. Her fear of the storm in the sky was, she knew, increased by what seemed its calculated delay. With every minute that it held itself back, it increased her sense of tension and of danger. She did not want

it to break till she had found shelter; but she knew that its withholding of itself, while relieving her less important anxieties, increased her vague mental distress.

But what most troubled her was the feeling she had that the storm, waiting to explode, was identified with her life and with her most recent and most poignant experience. It overhung her, it leaned upon her, it was everything that was not herself.

She increased her pace: she told herself she would go straight home. Westerby would be wanting his meal, and if she hurried she'd be home before the storm. She knew that her real thought was that she wasn't ready to tell Ezra that she had got the ring. She must tell him quietly, taking her own time. She still could not assure herself about his attitude to her present precipitancy.

It was as she pulled up in the yard that there came, not a mere roll but an explosion from the sky, followed by almost instant darkness. She could not remember ever seeing the light of the firmament lowered so quickly. It was as if a hand had suddenly turned down a switch. There was another explosion and then another and between the two, and announcing the second, a flash of forked lightning seared the black sky—the flash so brilliant that her eyes snapped shut as by reflex action. She stood still for a moment trembling, —she who, in other days, had laughed at thunder

itself; and it was then that she saw how close she was to Ezra's door.

Afterwards she supposed that it was instinct that guided her. She had determined to go straight to her own house. Yet here was Ezra's door open and pulling her towards it. At the moment she believed that she fled the storm: probably she did. For she feared the storm and the storm included in itself all that pursued her at that moment. Her every fear of Ezra's reception was united to the storm hanging, like the weight of the sky, upon a thread. She did not cry out as she crossed the threshold. She thought afterwards that had a seeing eye been present it would have seen nothing to suggest distress—the panic in her heart. But in the doorway she was stopped dead by a scene and a sound. She felt suddenly that she was being made mad in a mad-house. The noise of the storm had prevented her hearing what now she heard. But she understood. . . . Ezra's wireless set had been installed. And from it there now broke an extraordinary and hideous confusion of music, with aerial "interference." The switches must have been pressed over to the right. He must have intended to have all the noise he could. He must have been completely indifferent to the fact that the thunderstorm was bellowing in the instrument and that, at any moment, one of those livid flashes that he could not see might destroy his music for ever.

"Oh, Ezra!" Her cry was instinctive.

"Well?" It was a voice out of his throat, a croaking voice—the voice of a man who has been brooding for a long time over thoughts that have so disturbed him that when called back to the world of men and women he cannot at first bring the mind that controls and carries with it the voice out of the depths and back to normal. The questioning "Well?" was not loving, it was scarcely conciliatory. He knew who spoke to him: he showed no pleasure. He stood there white and strange, his lip trembling, his arms hanging at his sides as if waiting for some new and fantastic order. He didn't say, "What do you want?" He didn't say it. She thought he thought it. In a voice suddenly grown weak, she said:

"Why do you let that noise go on? Don't you know—didn't you see the lightning?——" She stopped, remembering and choked by remorse now —"Oh, my dear—sorry. I forgot!"

"Don't say nawthen!" He seemed to her to scream against the noise that went on rising, the storm duetting with the lunatic radio. "I didn't know when I turn it on! But when it wore on I hear the thunder and I think it don't matter—not a lot it don't. The thunder's loikely a long way away!"

"It don't be a long way! If you saw how close it come after the lightning! Your new set will be ruined——"

"You don't love it that much!" he said, speaking now against the roar of the rain on roof and paths. And she hadn't loved it! But she must stop it now or go insane. It shrieked at her, rolled with hideous laughter at her.

"Let me turn it off. Yes. There——" she took a step. He seemed to hesitate. But then he nodded curtly.

"If you want to—to save its life! It seem funny for you to be set on saving it. Never reckoned on *that*!"

She pressed the switches: the mad screams vanished as well as died out. Vanished was her thought—they had seemed like visible, insane spirits.

The thunder still rolled and crashed overhead and the rain drove upon the roof. But she had at least reduced the element of insanity in the noises about her ears. She looked at Ezra. It seemed to her still that something had happened to him. Was he involved by the general madness? He stood there as if he had escaped from normal self-control, or as if he had just covenanted with some overmastering impulse, perhaps derived by this exultant firmament outside over his head, to do something —something he had not thought of doing when she had seen him last.

What of herself though?—she was asking. What was she going to do, say, think? She was suddenly and abjectly conscious of her own in-

effectiveness. Perhaps it is the counsel of perfection that, when we feel weak, we should attempt nothing. But in her mind was still the thought that she must tell Ezra that she had bought the ring. She could not have told him while that horrible din continued. She didn't think she could tell him now. She wanted complete quiet: she wanted to whisper.

He settled the matter: and, as she reflected later, after all, he knew where she'd been.

"Well," he said sharply (sharply because of the noise of the storm), "well, did you git it?"

"Git it? Oh, Ezra! Yes, I got it. I felt . . . somehow silly. Gitting it. People I knew. They wore there. But—but it don't matter about that. Do it? . . . Oh, I wish the thunder would *stop*! . . . It don't matter, do it?" She took a step towards him.

He must have understood that she was coming and what she wanted. He seemed to be warning her off.

"There wore a chair near where you stand. *Is it there?*" The last words were spoken in a kind of roar, as a thunder-clap crashed overhead.

Obediently she sank into the chair. He'd perhaps, come over to her now. That was it. That was what he intended. Of course. She had misunderstood him. But she understood now. He wanted to come to her, storm or no storm. He wanted to pick his way. And perhaps—who knew?—perhaps

this would be the moment to tell him the truth. It wouldn't, she flattered herself suddenly, really surprise him very much. She'd given him so many hints of what that truth was. He depended on her now so completely that she might dare to say, "You've got it all wrong, dear! I'm not a girl. I'm just a woman in middle life who happen to love you as no other woman could, and who ask only to take care of you for the rest of her life!"

Dare she say that? Dare she risk all—and now?

She was cowed by the clattering universe! She was silenced by the metaphysical derision that she found implicit in the physical noise! She would not tell him now. Not *now*. She'd tell him merely that, now that she'd got the ring, there was only the special licence to arrange.

But she said nothing. She found that she could not speak—could only look at a lover who was changing under her eyes.

Of the nature of the change she could not be sure. But it seemed as if the personality inhabiting that scarred, frail body was not only mysteriously enlarging, but, in some way, fortifying itself. If there was an element of the fantastic in the effect, the effect itself was noble.

The man, having returned to his chair, was sitting there quite plainly planning or determining upon a particular action. And whereas the storm had merely distracted her, its noises seemed to assist him, as they help a man on the rare occa-

sions when the scale of his intention is commensurate with their volume and importance.

His face was set oddly, as if he waited to get through certain exchanges before speaking of the matter in his mind. She felt suddenly and oddly at fault, as a child does who has offended without knowing how.

"You all right?" she said, trying to show no want of ease.

"Yes. But, look here . . ." His voice was thick, as men's voices become with an emotion that is not suited to the existent atmosphere. They are then pressing on to conditions that fit what they would say.

Well, she was expectant now! Perhaps he desired her to be.

"There's something I want to say. Something important."

She felt a catch at the throat, but she said, "Yes?"

"Well, then, stop where you are. You got your seat?" He seemed to peer at her, as if actually seeing her in her place and measuring her distance from him. Perhaps he was seeing that distance grow until a universe lay between.

"I got to talk. I got something to say—the storm don't matter. It seem to help me, really. It clear my head. Like it clear the sky. I see things clear suddenly. I wore *going* to see them. But it take a long time for a blind man to see, I expect.

But I see *now*, and I got this to say. It goin' to hurt you!"

"Oh!" she cried suddenly, apprehensively.

"Well, wait. I fare to take a long time to think out what I'd do and what I'd say. And it seem to me that I got to do and say what I do and say now."

"Yes?" She could not think of anything else by way of encouraging him, though her heart was crying out, "Say it—say it if you've anything to say—say it——"

He cleared his throat. "Listen," he began again. "You think I wore blinded in the war. I never wore blinded in the war!"

She heaved a great sigh of relief. Was that it? Was that all? Was this the portentous communication for which he had been trying to prepare her? How little she cared whether or not he was a "war hero"! She was ready to laugh. The tempest had ceased to be charged with terror: it was ready to join in her laughter. But she had to answer: "Not blinded in the war, bor? It do be what they all say. It don't matter. But it seem true. You sure you haven't forgot? Wun'ful easy to forgit a whole heap o' nawthen!"

He laughed lightly but as if, from politeness, he suspended his serious conversation to do so. "You mean it's wun'ful easy for a man that happen to be not exactly? But I don't reckon to be not exactly. I'm good tidily in head as well as body.

Only I'm telling you something serious that surprise you. So you say to yourself: 'He's not exactly.' "

"And you mane that what you say don't be true? Then why did you say——"

"I never say! Nawthen ever come from *my* lips. It wasn't *I* that say I wore blinded in the war. I wore never blinded in the war. I wore in the war. I git wounded in the war. I git a hundred per cent pension in the war. I woren't blinded in the war. And I never say I wore. Nobody ask me. They say, 'You wounded?' and I say 'Yes.' And that wore true. If you remember, *you* never ask me."

"No. They tell me you wore wounded. Mr. Westerby say that."

"Well, I *wore* wounded. I wore wounded in the head. I wore wounded near to the eye. But he know I woren't blinded. He know that. He never say I wore blinded in the war. Or he never say for me to hear. If he'd said that, I'd have said it aren't true. But I just say nawthen. I knew that some folk knew what happen. It come round to you, I reckon, some day."

"Nawthen come round to me." She saw a reflection on her loyalty. "Nawthen dare come, perhaps!"

"You wore foine that way. You got to hear a word now. Because it can't be kept back no longer. Because soon she come."

Diana started: her recovered confidence had left

her: the air of the room seemed to grow in a flash dark and perilous as it does when we apprehend something worse than we can conceive of: she felt sick: the floor rose and fell like the sea under the cliff. She put out a hand. She heard herself whispering:

"She?"

Her voice seemed to detach itself and yet to fill the room and the world, giving new values to the atmosphere, as if it witnessed to the fact of a revolution or an earthquake. But her whisper had been a challenge.

. . . Had she no right to challenge? Hadn't she believed that, by some miracle, the only obstacle to the continuance of this fragile romance of hers had been eliminated? In a moment memories of all the agonies of those hours, of all the expenditure of nervous energy as she lay awake planning to defeat her enemies, all the fears of discovery, swept back into her mind.

She had thought that this romance of hers was safe at last—this romance that had seemed as delicately spun as one of those webs sprayed with dew that you saw in the early morning and that disappeared with a puff of air. She had evaded the merciless observation of youth, whether that of Doris or of the boy—and was still, by a miracle, the beloved of Ezra.

And now there was clearly a new and unmeasured danger.

"She?"

She did not know what to expect. Perhaps it was only Doris reappearing in a new form.

"Yes." He seemed to be thinking—as if he considered his answer.

"You don't mean Doris—agin?"

"Doris? Who?" For a moment he seemed puzzled. Then he laughed. "No. Not Doris. Couldn't think who you mane for a minute, but that young mawther go back to hers and stop there for all I care."

"Who then?"

"Who? Oh. The girl that go away. That they *put* away!" He emphasised the involuntary character of the unknown woman's disappearance, as if he would give Diana a hint. But Diana floundered to-day, she who was ordinarily so clear of head.

"Put away?"

"Yes." He had dropped his voice. He was sitting now with his chin higher than usual, as if he wanted to gather the precise effect of the words he was going to say. And then he added very softly, gently and with an odd detachment. "Yes, they put her away. For what she done."

With a gentleness that matched his speech, he raised a hand, extended a finger, pointed to his face.

And Diana understood.

II

Yes, she understood with a terrible clearness.

Gazing into that face that could not return her gaze, she traced the signs of a frightful assault. She had never been able fully to comprehend the explanation she had adopted for those marks on Ezra's face. She remembered now, by the way, that she had adopted the story of war wounds without actually having it confirmed by anybody, least of all by Ezra or by Westerby: she reflected now on her employer's furtive silence. But before she had found him out and exposed his motive for welcoming his nephew, she remembered that he'd never said he welcomed Ezra because he'd been wounded in the war. He hadn't said he welcomed him at all. He'd said he'd give him a roof for the time being because "he'd been blinded, poor bor." At the time that had seemed a good deal to come from Westerby. But she'd never been encouraged to ask him to say more than he volunteered. It amused her to contrast the earlier quality of that arbitrary and self-assured old reprobate with his manner and attitude to herself since she'd found him out. Where once he'd threatened, now he cringed. He'd refused her information even when it would have been to his own interest to give it. Once of a lease he'd said: "Now, look here. I reckon I've told you all I know or all I want *you* to know. That suffice! If something happen that

make me feel you ought to be told more, you'll be told. Talk! There's too much talk!"

She had often to ask questions to get her orders —any orders at all. And so he had not offered her any information about his nephew. She could remember nothing that Westerby had said about Ezra until she had found out the old man and brought him to his miserable knees!

As for Ezra, she knew now that he had studied silence from a motive of some sort. What was the motive? She could guess. But she still dared not ask nor even speak. She continued to stare at the face that had suddenly become, for her, a new and extraordinary revelation. Looking at the terrible scars, she remembered how she had so often seen them before as marks of German cruelty. She remembered, too, with a little shudder, the selfishness of which she'd convicted herself—she'd forgotten his suffering in the thought that if he were whole he could not have loved her, since he could not have believed her of his own generation.

She was still feeling for something now—an explanation not of words but of attitude. He had said so little: yet what he had said seemed to imply an immense conception of which she knew she was incapable.

But she struggled, not to attain that conception, but to rid herself of the thought that it existed. If she could believe this strange man was less rather than more than her original idea of him,

she would be happier because more intelligently conscious of ability to handle the situation. Only dimly did she understand his words. But, try as she might, she could not see that they could bear any but one meaning.

Yes, the face had a curious nobility but one that was half secret, as if the man suspected that such an effect might appear and was doing his best to suppress it. He frowned when he need not frown. He set his lips. Yet there was no anger or malice for her to read.

"You, you mean that when . . . when that woman come out, you'd see her again?"

He didn't comment on the irony of that last verb. Probably he was conscious of it, for the woman was the last he had seen or could see on earth. He answered simply, "Yes."

"She . . . she'd never have the wickedness—the —the face to come!"

"I think she would. Yes. Reckon she'd come. If I'd have her."

"And you would have her?"

"Yes. I'd have her."

III

Diana drew a very deep breath. It was no mere gesture. Involuntarily she always prepared herself when words seemed to be massing suddenly in her mind. If she spoke she could not easily stop. She

began urging, protesting, crying out.

"You mane—but, oh, darling, you can't mane that!" Everything was slipping away, the world was going from under her feet, the new world of her lovely discovery—"You *can't*," she sobbed. "If a woman wore wicked enough to do a thing like that—that surely end all for ever! I don't think of myself. We settle all that! It end! Of course. You git new thoughts. You git tired——"

"No, my dear. Not that exactly. I think for a long time I finish with her. And I think I want a woman. And so I do. I want a woman bad. And you seem sweet-loike and near and koind—and—and—a man fall easy for a woman when he want a woman, being a natural man. But then, you see, she come in upon me. When you don't see anybody at all—faces that you remember can come in on you. And she come in on me. And then I know——"

"Know . . ." She felt herself choking. "Know what?" The question came very low.

"I know that nothing that a woman do—or I suppose contrawise that a man do—make any difference. I loike a person and then I don't loike. It's how everybody feel. But what you call love—" He seemed to be searching for words. "It take yer mind over before you know it. And no matter how much yer mind tell you to put the woman out because she dew cruel things agin you—you just can't. Now you know what I mean——"

"Yes. But a woman that do that! That kill yer—kill yer face anyway—and take yer sight. You tell me, serious-loike, that—that you forgive her——"

"I can't help it, my dear. I can't stop myself. She happen to be my woman. It ain't a matter of gitting married. We ain't married—not yet!"

Diana started again, and put out a hand to a chair.

"You—you don't mean that you'd marry her—after what she do—after all the wicked cruelty——"

"After what she do. After all the wicked cruelty if that happen to be how I'm to call it all. Yes. Reckon I'd marry her."

"You're mad!" cried Diana suddenly and angrily.

"Reckon I'm not exactly. But if she say she wore willing, I'd marry her when she come."

Suddenly Diana was stirred by a hope.

"How do you know she will come—that she'd ever come near you? How do you know that?"

"She'll come. Yes, reckon she'll come. She's *bound* to come!"

"Because you are going to send her a message?"

"No, my dear. I reckon I *will* send her a message. But that don't make her come—not altogether. Because she know now, while I'm talking to you, that she come, that she can't help herself——"

"How would she know that?"

"Because these things work loike that. The mistake I make, my dear, when I speak to you, so—so loving—wore that I not understand. But I know now. She hurt me. But she know, as well as I know, that that don't separate us. That's what's so funny about love!"

"And what about—about our——"

"Our business? Yes." His face clouded. "I'm wun'ful sorry about that. You know, being like what I am, I forgit how much you think about all this. Honest, I never think you take it loike you do till when you come this marnin' and say you go for the ring. I think to myself I must stop her. But somehow the words fare to choke me. And I let you go. It wore when you wore gone that I sit at mine and think I never ought to have let her go. I never ought to have let her think about me loike that. But I tell you, my dear, I never know till to-day that you take it all so serious. I never see your face, you know . . ."

Was that an appeal for a consideration of his excuses? But a glance at his scarred face convinced her that he had always been honest, was honest now, and that she was the unhappy victim of an illusion. For a few days he *had* been drawn to her. After that he had allowed the relation to continue with no attempt to explore the consequences.

It was obvious that as the day of the release of that other woman came closer his imagination had

begun a new and violent reaction towards her. In what circumstances had they parted? . . . He'd told her nothing of that. Suppose he recognised that while she had treated him with great physical cruelty, that cruelty was but her return for his spiritual cruelty to her? Had he played with that woman, momentarily cast her off, only to know afterwards that they were bound? . . .

Thoughts, questions, raced through her mind as she stood staring still at him. She saw that he was absorbed.

Diana turned. She was silenced by his silence. And if she was angry, she was also, amazed.

Yet she knew that in her heart was an extraordinary feeling of expectation.

She moved quietly to the door. In the doorway she looked back. She could tell that he only half attended to her movements. He sat there with his head lifted, as if he was aware of some presence other than her own.

"I'll say good-bye for the present," she said, conventional to the last.

"Good-bye, come back soon!" he said, and spoke absently.

IV

The storm had gone! In the wet fields she looked about her, trying to focus the immense conception that she had set so suddenly before her. She couldn't crowd it into her mental view even now:

but she had an idea that when she could comprehend and when she had ceased to be overwhelmed by the man's idea, she would be overwhelmed by a new idea of the man. She noticed that, momentarily at least, she had no thought of her own desperate loneliness of heart, of her sudden and awful sense of loss. She did not pause to wonder if he suffered a compunction on her behalf. Yet the thought had come to her that while, on the one hand, Ezra deliberately avoided any sort of an apology in order to save her feelings, on the other he still scarcely realised what he had become to her. He was too completely absorbed in the idea that he belonged to the woman who was coming to him.

Diana, however, knew that she herself was now upon a new plane of emotional experience and that it was Ezra who had put her there. Evading her own distress, she thought of him as now he revealed himself. She could not condemn him for his treatment of her: her own feelings seemed of small importance even to herself in her present mood. She saw that her thought of him would presently enlarge itself until she would have such a new fear of him, that she would scarcely dare to come close. Yet—she was still satisfied of his essential simplicity. The scale of his thought might be heroic but she was sure he would angrily repel such an idea. If anything could rouse him to hot feeling it would be that what he did anybody else would not do. His view was, honestly, that he had

no choice. He must do what he was directed to do by Nature. It was a grotesque enough excuse for what Diana named a give-all-and-take-nothing attitude and what some other souls would have called quixotic. But it was a direct and simple outcome of the man's hard thought and experience. She thought he must have weighed this idea for days past. He had supposed that their relation was not one that perpetuated itself: he had clearly not felt bound. Her talk of a ring had brought him to see that he must decide whether the impulse to that other woman should be allowed to win.

There were moments when her distress was mixed with a sense of humiliation as she remembered that during all those later hours of her eager delight in him the man had been thinking of another woman. But the thought of the character of his surrender to this woman who had injured him so exalted her that she was soon lifted again from the plane of small chagrins. If she was full of grief, it was a nobler grief for the very nature of its cause. She went on over the wide, undulating common with its flashes of gorse brilliant after the rain, and its far, lifting tufts of green oak. She glanced at the scene while half-accusing it of being in some way ready to accentuate, if not to share, responsibility for her distress. What actually she did was to exchange her present sense of the landscape with the idea of it that she had left behind as she came to Ezra's cottage. Then she had walked

light of step: with a funny little thought that her life of love still maintained itself by means of the abiding miracle that hitherto had sustained it. She was torn by her dread of the future, though oddly enough what she feared was not the woman of whom he spoke, but the slow effect, upon herself, of this revelation of his moral force. A man capable of such detachment, of so immense a conception of his relationship to others, was much more terrifying than she had ever supposed Ezra to be. She had never taken him lightly. On the other hand, she had never feared to meet him intellectually or morally. Hadn't she taught him, out of Jeremy Taylor, to be content? She felt now unsure of herself, and this apart altogether from the fact that she loved when no longer she was loved in return. It was like having a friend in humble life who is suddenly elevated to the company of kings: you daren't approach with the old freedom—and you even have a suspicion that in the past you must have presumed too much on your intimacy, greatness having its foundations in the original character.

He was being impossibly heroic without intending to be. This was forgiveness on the largest scale. It was something that you read of in the Bible and books of that kind. It was not what you looked for in men in humble life. This was, perhaps, one of the people described, to her confusion while reciting the words, as "humble men of heart."

A woman had blinded him, had destroyed his

beauty, had banished him from the world of men, had made him so that he depended on others for guidance and almost for his bread.

He forgave her!

And he forgave her as if it were the natural thing to do!

If he had struggled to achieve forgiveness, if he'd mixed imprecations with his other words and if he'd said, at last, "Yes, I'll meet her. I'll tell her I bear her no ill-will. But ask her to go quickly afterwards." If he'd talked like that, she could have understood.

He made no noble gesture. He said calmly:

"Will I forgive her? Yes, I'll do that!"

But her sense of his heroism could not long endure. That exaltation must collapse. Heroism—yes—though she knew so little of the circumstances. He might have caused that woman offence, be in her debt, although nothing he had done or owed could deserve such requital as she had made. A hero, yes! But not for ever could the lover in herself be subordinated to her sense of his power and generosity, to a comprehension of his stature. No lover could continue always to admire whole-heartedly an altruism on the part of the loved one, the result of which is to decree separation.

She now told herself that she would have had him the bitter and remorseless enemy of the woman who had injured him. She would willingly

have shared plans with him to drive her for ever out of his life and knowledge.

His resolve to welcome the woman who had robbed him for ever of his sight had already ceased to seem beautiful. It was hateful to her.

But she went away to think.

CHAPTER XV

Diana went home to Westerby's. She thought that Tubb, emerging sneakily from the shadow of a shed, followed her with his eye. But she cared nothing to-day. After all, everything was finished. There was nothing that he could say!

And then suddenly as, entering the house, she went up to her own room, a new idea challenged the last. There was nothing that he could say? Wasn't the position, so far as reports went, unchanged?

The thought came to her suddenly out of the general darkness of her mind—the darkness that had descended as Ezra had told her in his slow, strange way of his intentions. This thought, that had not reached her before, arrived in her consciousness now, like a ship whose coming into a harbour affects the mind and political consciousness of all in the port, giving new vitality, fresh hope. Even now he did not know the truth about herself: that was the thought that had come.

She gazed at this idea which, as thoughts sometimes do, had become oddly objective, so that she could stare at it, study it, and at last embrace it. If she did not speak, he would go through life remembering the young girl that for a short time

he had believed he loved. Believed he loved? *Did* love! And his love for her would come back! The woman he had chosen would inevitably be less lovable than he now believed: or she would die of sickness—or perhaps remorse; for no woman could, surely, long endure to face such fearful evidence of her wickedness and cruelty. Perhaps, she, Diana, had no reason to hate her. Perhaps—because in love our emotions are rarely straight in grain—she could thank this woman for the greatest experience of her life!

We welcome cruelty, prejudice or stupidity when they put the beloved within our reach: we have no real concern for the feelings of him or her! Love can be, then, the precise opposite of altruism.

Diana did not hate this woman for what she had done: if Ezra had not been blind, he would not have paused in his walk through life to play with the idea that he loved her. How could he have loved if he had seen?

But if she did not find it in her heart to hate her for the past, she hated her for that future in which the woman was to carry Ezra away for ever!

But *when* she carried him away she would do so ignorant of anyone called Diana. If Ezra ever spoke of his friend who was housekeeper to his uncle, that woman would not know of whom he spoke. She could not betray her. And Ezra would not know. So that her image would continue to be

safe in his heart; to be often regarded and, if this woman died, to resume its ascendancy.

The thought was enchanting and overwhelming, terrifying, blissful. She dared not permit it—and permitted it all the time!

But—it was established upon a lie!

She thrust that admonition aside. She'd told him nothing. He should go on holding that image of her in his heart.

She thought hastily about his surroundings in Drowning Marsh. If he went away at once, as he said he must do, he'd hear no reports about herself. His habit of keeping to himself had held off the village so that, by a miracle, he still went ignorant of the truth. A few weeks more and the vision of her in his heart would be safe for ever. He would not discuss her with anybody now: he'd be too conscious of what had passed between them, of the blow he'd believe he'd dealt a young girl happy in her first love. There would be further security, both in her habit of silence and in the fact that she had always made him keep their relations a secret. She found that her mind began to alternate between satisfaction in the idea that she was now for ever young in his eyes and distress at realisation of the fact that they were separated and would never again meet. But distress continued her major feeling. The other thought was used chiefly to assuage her grief.

She went on with her plans. Even if Ezra re-

moved to a place a thousand miles away, she could not have borne to live in Drowning Marsh. It was not that she had walked every path with him: she had not. But in spirit he had accompanied her in all the moments of her conscious life. She had acquired strange new intimacies, the fulness of which, even now, she only half apprehended—intimacies with birds and trees and meadows. These things caught up her love, enriched it and gave it back to her heart for keeping. It is the first thing that a lover, loving for the first time, discovers—this truth that Nature watches eagerly for every sign of love, anxious to enlarge and ennoble it and write it in the visible book of her beauty.

Now she must put these things out of her heart, turn from the book that had been set open before her eyes: go away.

The plan she had made was one of which she had once hinted to Ezra. Always she'd had a desire to see other countries than her own. Her bold and vigorous curiosity had made her ready to do what many country folk fear to do. She could not afford the cruising of which she heard to-day even from the farmers, the well-to-do among whom had made voyage to Monte Carlo, Algiers and the like. (One or two were presently to boast of having touched at Barcelona the day before the tourists were flying for their lives.) Cruising was exactly the chance they needed: they had not to do business with foreigners. They were as children, and

in the compassionate care of the staff-captain of the cruising liner. They came back full of tales: Diana had listened and envied. And then an early ambition had sprung in her again; a plan of her girlhood was revived.

The life of a stewardess was, she had heard, a hard life. But she did not fear hardship, and just now she knew she'd welcome anything that served as distraction. What she knew of the life she had learnt from a friend who was in fact a stewardess herself. She wrote to that friend now and the letter would reach her this week when she landed in Liverpool on her return from Australia. If Emmy could do anything she would, and Emmy was now senior stewardess in the first ship of the Line.

Diana stood in her room with the light out, staring into a world subdued to a few near dimmed shapes. The moon was hidden. The sky was heavy with cloud. But it was a totally silent universe. It seemed to her that in spite of her resolve to go away to sea, all drama had vanished from her life.

She went on staring. Invisible now, the cottage where Ezra slept lay within such short reach. Yet it could so easily now seem to be across all the oceans in the world. She kept her eye upon the point where, in the night, her sovereign passion had had its throne.

Then suddenly she turned away, to climb into bed.

II

She supposed she would see Ezra sometimes, if only formally, until he or she left. But on the morning after her talk with him she found his room empty. She looked about her in some confusion and distress. But her firmness of character and instinctive common sense came to her rescue: it was much better for both of them that he should go at once. Further meetings would have been intolerable. Yet she was curious as well as troubled, and, going to the door, looked out. Not wholly to her surprise, Tubb appeared almost at once.

"Looking for Mr. Ezra?" he said, and suppressed the leer implicit in his attitude.

Even to-day he could not forget his fear of Diana. He corrected his tone as he went on, explanatory and inclined to cringe.

"Reckon he go by first train. He make me carry his bag and help him along. He say I wore to tell nobody till him wore away."

"Where did he book to?"

"Don't know. He clear me off home afore he'd git his ticket. Secret bor, Mr. Ezra! Keep to himself!"

"Yes," said Diana.

She showed no further distress. She wasn't sure, indeed, that she was not relieved. She dared to think that Ezra's action was due to his consideration for herself. Westerby was her next concern.

"Gone, has he?" Westerby spat. "Good riddance to bad rubbish! That's what I say!" He looked slyly at Diana. "Never could abide him."

Diana turned on her heel: she'd tell him about herself later. During the day she went to Gippeswyk and found a competent, elderly woman to recommend to Westerby as her successor. She thought he'd not object: he wasn't in a condition to do so with any force. The woman would do her work properly. The woman was her own age. Diana would have preferred one older. But a moment later she was reassured.

"You are Mrs. Silcock?"

"Yes. And I'll be pleased to come if your master think he'd like me to——"

"Oh, I reckon he'll have you," said Diana, for she'd heard the woman's voice. Westerby should have this woman. For Mrs. Silcock's voice was husky and couldn't be mistaken for that of a young girl. It wasn't in the least likely that Ezra would come back. But if he did he'd not hear a voice that rivalled that of a woman to whom he'd been drawn by hearing her speak. Diana made no mistakes in matters of this kind. Her planning was always sound.

"I'll tell Mr. Westerby that you'll come to his on the fifteenth. And if you don't hear different, you come and I'll be there to tell you the things you got to do. There don't be a heap!"

"Anybody but him at his'n? Did I hear there

wore a young man that live——"

"That did live. He go away. Or I think he say he go." This very casually. "If he come back and you attend to him, you just give him his meals. He come to his uncle for dinner and git his own tea. He like to be left to himself."

"Reckon I'll leave him all right!"

Emmy wrote that Diana could have a temporary job at once, as a woman had gone sick, but the liner sailed in four days.

"It's one of our smaller ships, so you won't have me to look to," wrote Emmy, with the pride of seniority, "but I can't promise there'll be anything else."

Diana went again to Gippeswyk and brought back Mrs. Silcock, gave her an intensive course of instruction and bade her return next day.

"I'll be gone then."

She'd told Westerby of the change and his reply had been grumbling agreement.

It occurred to her that secretly Westerby would rejoice that circumstances had removed her. He would never have found courage or energy to send her away himself.

She set out for the station, bag in hand. She would not have Tubb's help; also, as she discovered presently, she was glad to resume the masculine character by the gesture of carrying her own baggage.

It was while she still struggled over the common

that she heard a step behind. Turning, she saw a boy dismounting from a bicycle. She knew the boy for young Ashplant. In his right hand was a piece of wood roughly cut into the shape of a revolver.

"Oh, Miss Cliss. You going away?"

"Yes. Going to-day. Going now!"

She'd stopped to look down at him. Incidentally she was being given a rest, since she must put down her bag.

"I say, I'm sorry you're going." He said the words not carelessly but as if she, to whom he scarcely meant anything, had a significance in his mind.

"Are you sorry?" She was momentarily moved. Here was a person she did not really know who seemed to mind her going.

"I'm *very* sorry, Miss Cliss. I remember you coming to ours. My father thinks I'm a fool—because I—I—— I say, Miss Cliss, you don't want anybody put on the spot, do you? I could take him for a ride, you know—or just put one through him. Or"—for Diana was shaking her head sadly at having to refuse these knightly offices—"if you wanted somebody sleuthing? . . . I can do that. I tracked Mr. Westerby's nephew, you know!"

Diana started. "You did? When, where?"

"When he went away. He had that beastly chap, Tom Tubb, and I thought Tubb might shoot him

on the road. So I kept him under observation, you know."

"Tom saw him off?"

"No. He cleared Tom off before he bought his ticket. But I was on the station. I let Tom escape. I stopped to see the other chap go."

"Did—did you hear him buy his ticket?"

"Yes. He said London."

"Did he git a return?"

"No. I heard him say 'No return for me.' That was what he said."

She nodded. They walked along together silently. But the boy wanted to put her bag on his bicycle and she could only let him.

He called out as she went into the station: "Don't forget if you want anybody rounding up to let me know," then mounted and rode off into the universe of his imagination.

Diana had no illusions. She didn't sentimentalise the fact that a child was the one person to regret her going. But the thought of the boy made a pleasant sensation in her heart as the train carried her from familiar scenes.

She knew that she was glad when the train had put Drowning Marsh behind her and was rushing on into the world of adventure.

She stared out relentlessly. She had a curiously complete acquaintance with the facts of her own psychology and from these she derived a generalised knowledge. From this she argued that at

certain crises of life, it was important to change to new scenes and occupations, and to the consequent new outlook. If the change was really complete the effect was very much greater proportionately than in the case of a minor change. By forcing such a change upon yourself you subjected yourself virtually to an anaesthetic. You could be suffering the intensest agony and yet forget pain for the moment in which you were standing upon a deck, for the first time staring at the ocean—or so she was ready to believe. She prided herself, even now, upon the regularity of her mental processes and upon her quickness in dealing with dangerous situations.

She was doing the only thing a woman, situated as she was, could do. She uprooted herself. If Drowning Marsh were to laugh at her doing so at her age—let Drowning Marsh laugh and go on laughing!

It knew nothing of her real motive: not even the smutty and malicious Tubb knew that.

She did not like great cities—they impaired the fluency of her spirit, but Liverpool began to please her as soon as she drew close to the river. To-morrow she'd be free of England. She drew deep breaths of the sea air and then went back to her dingy lodging.

It was now that she came suddenly face to face with something that hitherto she had successfully evaded. She knew of the evasion. She didn't excuse it. She persisted in it deliberately.

She could not persist longer.

From the moment when she had left Ezra after his telling her of his intention to take back that woman of his, she had rejoiced in the thought that he had never known, and now need never know, the truth. She had said to her heart that, for him, she was a young mawther, the girl with the beautiful voice who, for a time, had drawn him to herself and away from the woman who had slain his sight. She continued a lovely, conjured vision, and no tongue of irony, speaking out of the shadows, could destroy her claim that, in her man's mind, she was a creature of youth and beauty. That miracle of illusion persisted. And now none could destroy it!

It should go on. And who knew, when that wretched woman came to him, he might find himself turning from her in sudden dislike and remembering again the "girl" he'd met in Drowning Marsh?

She had lately noticed a curious thing about her attitude to her own romance: not only did she believe in her love for Ezra, but she had come to believe in his conception of herself. Less and less did she remember that she was in middle life, a woman with greying hair and an over-full figure. To-day there were moments when she was the true rival of the other woman, when she was the "young mawther," the innocent girl, the creature of Ezra's first thoughts. The process by which she

had reached this position was, perhaps, less difficult to explain than might appear. Her mind was instinctively virginal; with all her wisdom in the market, her ease in dealing with men, she had the innocence of a mawther experiencing her first love affair. She had the mind of a girl where the man was concerned. She had only to close her eyes to remember that she loved and had been loved. If not immediately, love had at last wooed her from the trammels of the once fixed idea that she was old. She could now believe in the young girl concept so completely as to enter the mind of Ezra and see him turning from the woman he was allowing to re-enter his life; refusing indeed to let her re-enter and looking to his innocent mawther—herself!

In any case she had merely to leave the situation as it was to make sure that his attitude would not change, his picture of her would not die out, his romantic attachment to his vision of her would not fail.

III

But she found presently that she still could not prevent herself from seeing the matter in another light. The stern Puritan in the woman spoke, as truth always speaks, very simply in her heart. The whole thing was an imposture. It was not merely a ludicrous incident in the life of a sentimental old maid: it was, bluntly, a lie. If she allowed him to

go on cherishing her memory, there was the greater danger to his loyalty to that woman who had injured him and whom he meant to marry. Let him know all and he'd forget her!

Let him know and truth would be vindicated.

But how shall I let him know? she asked.

For a moment she saw a chance to compromise. I can do nothing till I return from my first voyage. Then I might find a chance of visiting Drowning Marsh: it would seem perfectly natural for me to call on my old employer. He would certainly have Ezra's address. I could visit Ezra and tell him the truth. Or I could, at least, write to him.

But truth, always impatient, adores short-cuts and insists on discovery of the fastest ways and means of issuing and confirming knowledge, pointed out that if she could write then, still more easily could she write now with hope of reaching him, seeing that his address would be known to-day, though possibly forgotten in two months' time. If she ever meant to tell him the truth, she must tell him now: she must write him a letter.

For a woman of so direct a mind, she had a new instinct for compromise: she suspected she'd developed it in recent weeks. She found herself at a desk in the dreary lodging, with its dark curtains and perpetual odour of bacon fat. She began to write. She thought of a love-letter. But in the end she tore up a true lover's note and wrote a brief, businesslike "confession": ". . . I did not think,

dear, you could mean that. . . . When I knew, I liked loving you so much that I could not let you go. . . . Very sorry, I'm sure. . . . Well, now you know the truth. The woman that tell you, love you. She say that much. She say no more. Good-bye."

She'd written the letter. The element of compromise in her mind had bidden her write to free her spirit a little: you needn't post the letter. You can think that you'd like to consider what you've said for a week or two. Then you can, if you choose, post from the first foreign port. The point is you've faced the need to write. You've written. If you still feel at that first port that you're not compelled to post till the second port, or until you get home again, well and good: the letter is at least written.

She glanced at the clock. She must go to bed. In the morning she'd join the ship.

She did not think she could sleep at all. She lay remembering Suffolk. She was sick for its fields. But her memory of them was really only a memory of the man of whom she had thought during every moment that she had looked at them. They were merely a green and half-secret pageant depicting love, as the whole field of Nature is to every lover.

Towards morning she slept. She used to say she had more sense than to dream. She woke, looked at the clock and rose at once. She must hurry to be on board by nine. She had a taxi brought to the door and her trunk put in. When she took up her

handbag-purse, she noticed an envelope. It was the letter she had written to be posted only at some time in the future and when she felt like posting. She could, she suddenly remembered with satisfaction, tear it up. She need never take it to the foreign port at all. He'd then never know the truth. She could, indeed, tear it up here and put it in the empty grate of her room.

But she let it remain in the bag and went downstairs. There was nobody to say good-bye to, and the thought made her feel the more forlorn. The red-eyed youth who ran up and down stairs with luggage and liked to be called "the porter," accepted her sixpence and shut the door of the cab upon her.

Quickly she was being borne through the streets of the most famous port in the Empire. She had no eyes for its character or quality. Her only thought was to reach the ship and begin work. After all, she wasn't going as a passenger! By the end of the day she'd be satisfactorily tired out, first with cleaning and then with attending the needs of querulous women in the second class.

They'd think her elderly and, perhaps, for her years, incompetent. She didn't care. In the mind of one person she'd continue fair and young.

A friendly steward grabbed her trunk and welcomed her into the company of the ship. All was new bustle. New scents of sea, tar, ships. The vitalising odour of adventure. First she was shown

what she must do. After that she was trying to do it. Being a strong woman and highly endowed with common sense, she was soon making herself useful.

At four o'clock the flood-tide of passengers swept over the ship. At six the bell rang to take off the visitors . . . to part lovers!

A steward was running round the decks: "Letters for shore? Letters for shore?"

Diana started. A passenger near her was searching a writing-case and then dropping a letter into the bag.

Suddenly Diana spoke.

"One moment!" She thrust a hand into the pocket of her apron. *Had* she put the letter there?

Had she known what she must do?

It was there and she plucked it out.

". . . Mr. Ezra Dearbourn, c/o . . . Please forward."

Diana dropped the letter into the bag.

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